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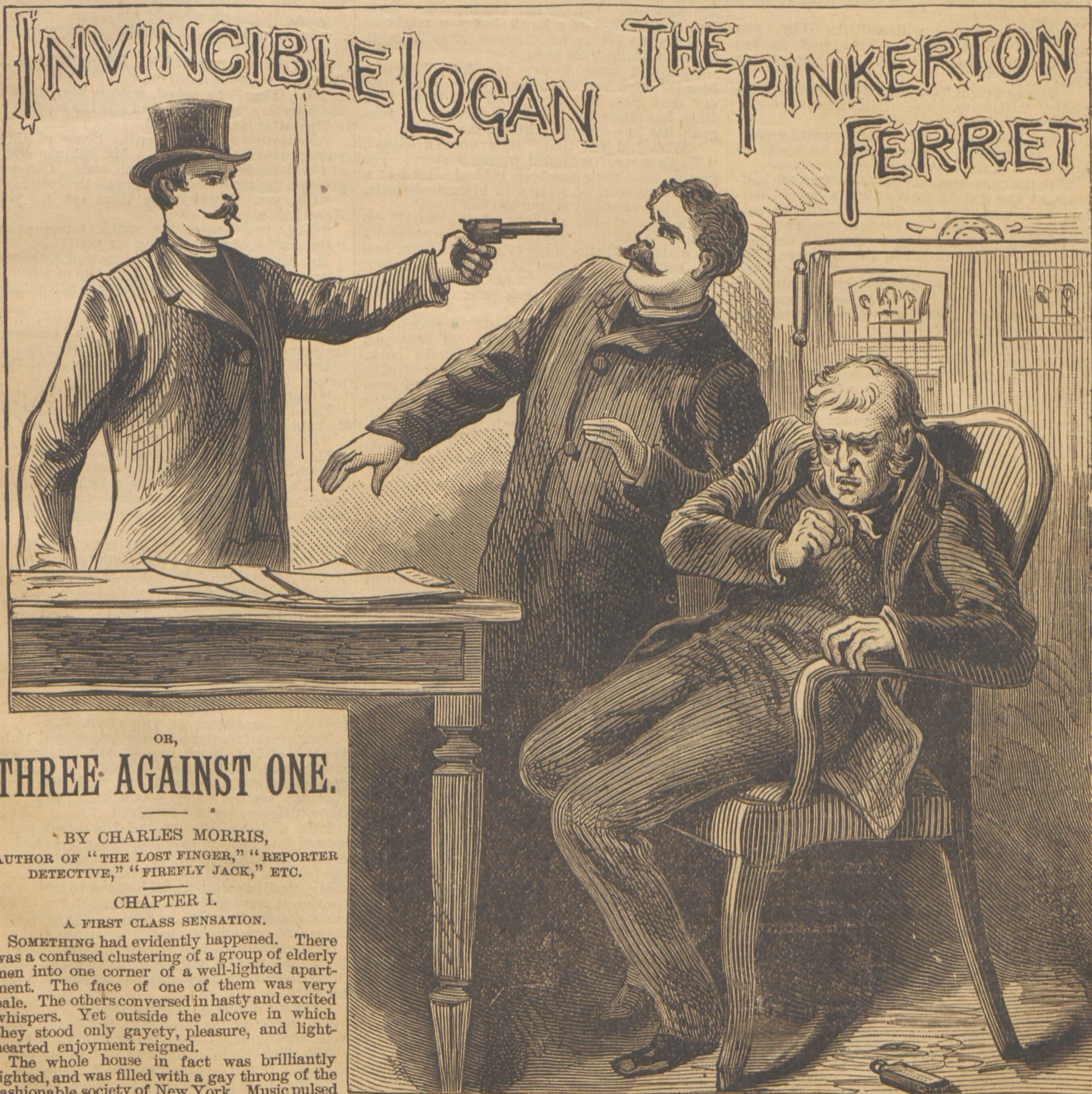
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OR, THREE AGAINST ONE.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "THE LOST FINGER," "REPORTER
DETECTIVE," "FIREFLY JACK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FIRST CLASS SENSATION.

SOMETHING had evidently happened. There was a confused clustering of a group of elderly men into one corner of a well-lighted apartment. The face of one of them was very pale. The others conversed in hasty and excited whispers. Yet outside the alcove in which they stood only gayety, pleasure, and light-hearted enjoyment reigned.

The whole house in fact was brilliantly lighted, and was filled with a gay throng of the fashionable society of New York. Music pulsed through the rooms, and the sound of dancing feet could be heard from the large saloon. Else-

"KEEP OFF!" REPEATED LOGAN, STERNLY, AS HE DREW A PISTOL. "YOU WILL FIND ME A BAD MAN TO ATTACK, JUST NOW, YOU DOUBLY DYED VILLAIN."

where groups of lively promenaders moved to and fro, while merry laughter and jovial chat everywhere resounded.

The mansion was a large and elegantly furnished one. It was the city residence of Silas Middleton, a wealthy New York broker, who had given the party which now filled the house with the beauty, splendor and gayety of the fashionable society of the metropolis.

Yet something had happened that threw a shadow over the scene of pleasure. As yet the whisper of it was confined to that earnest group of men in the alcoved corner. Elsewhere the fun went on without fear or thought of disaster. The tide of trouble was just rising. Its dark waters had not yet spread.

The conference continued earnest and excited. The pale member of the group was Mr. Middleton himself. He seemed, indeed, as if overwhelmed with the weight of some misfortune, and stood like one paralyzed while his friends continued their eager conversation.

"What is to be done?" demanded one of the group. "People are looking curiously in this direction. Shall we let the affair out?"

"No, no!" cried Mr. Middleton. "It must be kept secret! I depend on your honor, gentlemen, not to divulge it. I have reasons, deep reasons, for secrecy."

"Then your face will sell it. Why, you are pale as a ghost. This spot is too public for our talk. Is there no more private spot?"

"You are right," exclaimed the broker, hurriedly. "Come with me. Can I trust to you for secrecy, gentlemen?"

"Yes, yes, certainly," was the general reply.

He led the way from the *salon* to a private apartment in the upper portion of the house.

Here the conversation continued for some half-hour, at the end of which time a person who had been sent for, in all haste, entered, and was at once shown to the room of conference.

He was a quiet-looking personage, of medium height, and rather broad in the shoulders. His closely-shaved countenance showed well-cut features and an unbrowned complexion, with dark eyes and hair. Quiet as he looked he was evidently alert and intelligent, while his eyes were full of fire and spirit.

"Good-evening, gentlemen. I believe I am wanted here. Here is my card," he said, his keen eyes roving from face to face of the somewhat stolid but business-like men before him.

He handed the card to Mr. Middleton, whom he seemed to recognize at a glance as the leading personage.

"John Logan, of Pinkerton's Agency," read the broker; "Invincible Logan. I have heard of you, sir, and am thankful that you are detailed. Something has happened. Something very serious. Take a seat, sir. Will you tell him the story, Mr. Elkins! I am hardly in trim for talking yet."

The person appealed to, a small-framed, brisk man of business, at once began an eager narration, to which the Invincible listened quietly and gravely.

The story was a very wordy one, but the detective let it go on with but few interruptions, except to put in a question here and there.

At its conclusion he asked Mr. Middleton some questions, in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone of voice.

He then rose and turned to the group.

"It is best that this matter should be kept perfectly quiet," he remarked. "Will you gentlemen mingle with the guests as if nothing had happened? An alarm might ruin everything. Mr. Middleton had better remain here. His face will betray him. Mr. Elkins, will you show me the spot? But first, I wish to take a quiet walk through the rooms and look at the guests. And, Mr. Middleton, will you please have inquiry made if any of your guests have left the house within the last hour? I should like a list of the names of all such persons. Will you accompany me, Mr. Elkins?"

The conference broke up with these words. Mr. Middleton remained in the room, in company with one of his older friends. The others descended to the room below, the detective in company with Mr. Elkins.

The ready and quick-witted officer had made some hasty changes in his apparel, had replaced his dark necktie with one of more fashionable color, and, though soberly dressed, seemed quite capable of carrying himself off as one of the invited guests.

But, while all this was going on above, all was not at rest below. A whisper had got afloat in the rooms somehow, it was hard to tell how. The unknown disaster had cast its shadow on the gay throng.

The lights seemed to burn less brightly. The flowers had lost something of their brilliant hue. There was a tendency to huddle together and converse in whispered accents. What was amiss nobody knew, yet numerous wild conjectures were in the air. It seemed as if the earnest group in the alcove, and the broker's scared pallor, had sent a thrill of alarm through the air of the mansion.

In the smoking-room, at the rear extremity of the mansion, a group of young men had gathered, fashionably dressed, yet somewhat fast-looking young bloods, the most of them. They were in earnest chat over their cigars.

"What is it, Will?" asked one of them, as a handsome youth rather hastily entered the room. "You ought to know. And we are all boiling over with curiosity. What is wrong?"

"I know nothing about it," answered Will, flinging himself testily into a chair. "I don't believe there is anything wrong. Some fool has given a false alarm, as another fool will yell fire if he sees a spark. And there are always plenty of fools to spread an alarm."

"Including us, I suppose."

"Oh, present company is always excepted," rejoined Will. "Of course we are the wise men of the party. What have you heard? They are fluttering out there like chickens that have seen the shadow of a hawk, but you might as well try to get cream from skim milk as to learn anything from them."

"Do you mean to say you haven't really heard?" cried one of the group. "Why, they say that Mrs. Middleton, who you know is in Ohio, has fallen dead of heart disease. A telegram has just come in with the news."

"Who told you that?" interrupted a second. "That's some frightened woman's story. The fact is, your uncle has been robbed. He had a very large sum of money in his private safe, and it has vanished within the last hour."

"Nonsense! It's nothing of the kind!" exclaimed a third. "There's no real secret about the matter. He has a heavy deal in wheat, and the bottom of the market has dropped out, through the failure of a house in Chicago. It's enough to make a man turn pale. A sweep of a million, they say."

"Who set that yarn afloat?" demanded a fourth, pushing hastily forward. "I have just heard the true story. Mr. Middleton's bark, the *Neversink*, with a valuable cargo of silks from France, has struck an iceberg and gone down. A *Cunarder* is just in, and brings the only man left alive of the crew."

Will had remained seated, looking somewhat distractedly from one to another of the speakers, as they pushed forward excitedly with their stories.

A satirical smile curled his lips as the last one finished.

"Who else knows anything?" he queried, with a quizzical look round the group. "As my uncle has no ship called the *Neversink*, and don't import silks, that yarn won't pass. What else has happened? What do you know about it, George?"

The person he spoke to was a stout, full-faced young man, who wore a long, dark mustache, and whose countenance showed traces of dissipation. He had sat listening to the conversation with a cynical look on his face.

"Everything," was the answer. "But everything just now means nothing. I think it is about time to build a dam across the sluiceway of lies. If the thing goes on at the present rate they'll have your uncle dead and buried, and a forty-ton rock on his coffin. It is your duty to put a stop to it, my boy. Tell the people what has really happened, before they fill New York with floating lies."

"Nothing has happened," answered Will, coolly. "I have been trying to trace this fright to its source, and all that is known is that Mr. Middleton grew pale, and left the room with some of his friends. I asked one of them, and it seems it is nothing but one of the fits of vertigo to which he is subject. The imagination of some long-tongued gossips has done all the rest."

"Then, for mercy's sake, stop them!" spoke a brisk voice near by. "The whole party will break up in disorder, and no end of wild nonsense get afloat, unless this thing is checked."

The speaker was Mr. Elkins, who had entered the room in company with the detective while this conversation was in progress.

The latter personage had walked quietly to the table, helped himself to a cigar, and sat smoking, apparently without paying the slightest attention to the talk that was going on around him. His eyes seemed fixed on the ceiling,

and one would have said that he did not see a person present.

"Much obliged, Mr. Elkins," said Will. "That is good advice. I will take it. There are no greater geese than a party of fashionable people, to whom gossip is as sweet as honey to a bear. I'll see what I can do."

He left the room as he ceased.

"That is at the bottom of it all," remarked Mr. Elkins, quietly. "A mere vertigo. Mr. Middleton will be all right again in an hour. Shall we seek the dancing-room, Mr. Logan?"

"Please let me finish my cigar first," pleaded the detective. "It's too good to desert half-smoked. But don't let me detain you."

He leaned lazily back in his chair, and sent clouds of smoke to the ceiling, while his eyes indolently swept the round of the faces in the room.

"Oh, I am in no haste. Smoking or dancing, it is all one to me."

The conversation between the young men went on, the detective, whom they evidently regarded as one of the guests, putting in a word now and then. But his eyes were busier than his tongue. He was secretly reading the characters of the persons around him.

"There, I have had full enjoyment of that weed, Mr. Elkins," he said laughingly, as he flung away the remnant of his cigar. "Now I am in your hands, to play the martyr in any way you will."

"All right," answered Mr. Elkins, in his brisk fashion. "Let us stroll on, then."

"Anything?" he asked, with a keen look at the detective, when they had left the room.

The latter shook his head.

"No professionals, at least. Some of those young men live a fast life, Mr. Elkins. They are burning the candle at both ends. Can you give me their names, addresses and vocations?"

"Oh, yes. I will write them out for you. Now shall we go to—"

"Yes, yes," came the quick interruption. "But isn't that man looking for you?"

Mr. Elkins turned in the direction indicated. A servant stood there, holding a slip of paper in his hand. He had been seeking to attract Mr. Elkins's attention.

"Do you wish to see me?"

"Mr. Middleton sends you this, sir," answered the servant respectfully, presenting the slip.

Mr. Elkins glanced quickly over it, and then passed it over to the detective.

"It is the list you asked for," he said. "Three persons have left the house. You will find their names here. Now shall we go on?"

"Certainly. This can wait."

He folded the slip of paper, and deposited it carefully in his vest pocket, while he followed Mr. Elkins, whose face wore a look of importance and excitement that showed no reflection in the cool and steady countenance of the experienced officer.

We will not follow them in their quest, but remain with the party. Will Emory had hastily passed from group to group, circulating his theory of the trouble.

When the gathering broke up, an hour or two later, most of the people were satisfied that they had been alarmed without cause. Yet some of them steadily ignored the vertigo theory. They were sure that something serious had happened, which had been concealed for good reasons.

CHAPTER II.

A COUNT AT THE CLUB.

THE great Middleton party had ceased to be the talk of New York society, yet the mystery which had attended it had not quite gone out of people's minds. There were many who were sure that the vertigo story was a blind, and that something serious had occurred.

Half a dozen persons had the secret, and a secret that is held by a half-dozen is bound to creep out. Enough of it got abroad to keep up the belief in a concealed mystery.

Mr. Middleton's demeanor added to this. He continued depressed and silent, as if full of uncomfortable thoughts. Some heavy weight seemed to rest on his mind.

"Are you really sick, uncle Silas?" asked Will, who resided with him. "Or has something mysterious happened, as everybody is saying?"

"I think I will go see the doctor this morning," answered the broker. "I am not well, Will, that's a fact. You had best take my place at the office this morning, as I will not be down till late. It will be a new experience for you."

"Why, I have my desk at the office, uncle."

"Which you see very little of, you wild rascal. You set a terrible example to your fellow clerks, Will."

"Mercy on us, I ain't going to make myself miserable to serve as an example to my fellow clerks. There's too much sport afloat for that."

"I shall have to cut down your allowance, you scapegrace," said the broker, with a faint smile.

"Then I'll live on my salary," rejoined the laughing youth. "I do that part of my work anyhow. I draw my salary faithfully. Good day, uncle. I'm off for the office."

Will was away like a shot. The conversation had taken a turn which he did not care to keep up, and he failed to perceive that it had been done purposely by his uncle, to escape inconvenient questions.

Yet Will was not wanting in shrewdness. As two weeks from the date of the party slowly passed away it became evident to him that something serious was amiss. There were comings and goings of strange people about the house. Mr. Middleton's depression seemed to grow deeper. Something was wrong. What was it? That was the question.

One evening at the end of this period, a group of young men was gathered in the conversation room of one of the New York club houses. They included Will Emory, George Duncan, and several others of those whom we have already seen in Mr. Middleton's smoking room.

But they had thrown off their party manners, and wore the aspect of fast young bloods, whose only duty in life was to get rid of their parents' hard-earned cash, in any sort of wild way.

They were lounging around the table well supplied with smoking utensils, while the air was heavy with the vapor that rose from pipes and cigars.

"That new importation, Count Ormond, is making a deuce of a flare up in society," said one of them, taking the meerschaum from his lips. "The ladies are wild about him. It isn't often they drop down on an Italian count. He's a prime fellow too. I'll say that for him."

"Where did he come from?" asked a second. "Who knows anything about him?"

"Ask Will," remarked George Duncan. "It was his uncle Middleton introduced the count to society."

"Faith, I can't answer for him," rejoined Will carelessly. "It seems that my uncle met him in his travels in Europe last year, and invited him over. The count has accepted the invitation. That's all I know."

"I wonder where he keeps his castles," queried George, with a cynical smile. "I heard of no Count Ormond during my travels in Italy."

"That's easily accounted for," said another of the party, with a laugh. "I don't believe you mixed much with the nobility in your travels. I fancy you had other fish to fry."

"You fellows are too confoundedly critical," remarked another of the group, in a testy tone. "Count Ormond's a prime chap. He's full of life and spirit, and he's got a touch about him that we don't have this side the water. There's a tone in the nobility that we democrats don't get."

George laughed in an irritating manner.

"I give in, Mort. That noble tone settles the question. It's a bud I can't get in my button-hole. Come, light another cigar and don't mind me. I've got an ugly fancy for plucking peacocks."

"Hush!" warned another. "There comes the count now. It would not be pleasant if he knew how we were discussing him."

"Not to him, maybe. It wouldn't hurt my feelings," growled George, as he twisted himself round in his seat to observe the titled personage thus announced.

The gentleman whom they observed walking easily toward them was of good figure and proportions, and of a quiet indolence of manner that was in strong contrast with the American briskness.

He was of a swarthy, southern complexion, with dark-brown hair and black whiskers. His face was not exactly handsome, yet it was one of that kind that grows on a person.

There was a foreign air about him, both in the cut of his whiskers and the fashion of his light-colored and loosely-fitting clothes.

He walked up to the group, twirling a flexible cane, and with something very light and airy in his manner.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," he remarked, with a trace of foreign accent. "You do pass life away in smoke, I perceive."

There was a burst of greetings from the party. George Duncan alone remained silent, though his eyes were fixed on the count with an investigating look.

In a few moments their noble friend was seated in an easy attitude, with the cigar that had been pressed on him held airily between his fingers, while he chatted away in a gay light manner that bespoke his Latin blood.

There was something attractive about the man, despite his airiness. He had a good voice and a free flow of fashionable chat, while his laugh was musical and infectious. His eyes seemed his most uneasy feature. They could change from an indifferent look to a very sharp one, and had a fashion of roving from point to point that made it not easy to fix their glance. Yet, at times, they settled into an intent and piercing look. But this was never for more than an instant, and they quickly resumed their restless roving around the room.

"Been making a round of calls this afternoon, gentlemen," he said, showing his white teeth in a smile. "Ladies Van Horn and Allingham, Moreland and Singerly. Your American dames are very beautifuls. Very beautifuls and sweet. I do much enjoy them!"

"Thank you, count, for the ladies," answered Mott, with a gratified look.

"And they talk so lively and charming," continued the count.

Everybody seemed grateful for this compliment to the American ladies, except Will, who appeared to be thinking of something else, and George, whose eyes were fixed with a cynical glance on the count's expressive face.

"They do talk gossip with so delightful an air," "Gossip, eh?" ejaculated George. "So you've found that out, count?"

"The ladies is privileged, you know. The ladies everywhere is privileged." He waved his hand airily. "And they do say sour things in such sweet ways that one forgets their taste."

"You are a regular ladies' man, count. But what is the particular item of interest now?"

"Why, they do relate that Mr. Middleton has been robbed. Of some valuable diamonds, gentlemen. Some very valuable diamonds."

His eyes roved round the circle of faces as he spoke, but settled for an instant on Will Emory's face with the intent and piercing look of which we have spoken.

Will had in fact started violently at these words, while an exclamation like an oath came from his lips.

"What in the deuce do you mean, sir?" he ejaculated, hastily. "Robbed? Of diamonds? Who set afloat such a cock-and-bull story? My uncle has no diamonds. That's like the stories that were set afloat on the night of the party, when they sunk a ship that was never heard of, with a cargo of silks that were never woven."

"I am not responsible, my very dear sir," rejoined the count, with an easy wave of his hand. "It is the ladies, bless their sweetness. It is the charming ladies told me that secret."

"They didn't know they were pouring their news into a sieve," remarked George, dryly. "You are not good at keeping secrets, count."

"Ladies' secrets, you know," replied the count with an expressive shrug. "They are not for keeping. But I admit there are some ladies who can hold their tongues."

"And some men," said Will dryly, and a little angrily. "But they are not counts, and do not come from Italy."

The count's eyes flashed at him sharply and hastily. He looked confused for a moment, and then burst into a gay laugh.

"By Jove, but I did get it hard!" he cried merrily. "Mr. Emory, you are one wicked person. One very unkind person."

"I couldn't help it, count," answered Will, in good humor at the success of his thrust. "You leave yourself so open, you see. Come, let's forget and forgive. You are not smoking."

"I will enjoy a cigar with you gentlemen," rejoined the count, as he lighted his cigar. "I do like you Americans. You are so different from us Italians. And so queer."

"We have some queer ways, that's a fact," remarked George. "We know how to open the eyes of you foreign gentlemen, when we take a fancy that way."

"That is what I am here for," answered the count, with a quick glance at George's cynical and secretive countenance. "To get my eyes open is my object, for there is much to behold in your great country."

"Faith, I'm on hand if it's an eye-opener you want," cried George, in reply. "What say you, lads? Shall we show the count a bit of New York life? So far he has only tried the upper crust. Let us give him a taste of the lower crust of the pie."

"That's the idea. I'm on hand. We'll show him something of life," came from the enthusiastic youths.

Several of them sprung to their feet, as if eager to be off.

Will Emory remained quietly seated.

"One word more, count," he remarked. "Will you please tell me just what it was you heard about my uncle? I don't promise to believe it, for there is no end to the lies afloat. But I'd like to nail some of these lies in their pas-sag."

"I know nothing whatever about the matter," rejoined the count. "But Mr. Middleton is one friend of mine. I do like him much, and I very much hope there is no truth in this. But they do say that my good friend has been robbed of some very valuable diamonds. Worth one-half million of dollars. And he is very sad therefore."

"That's a cheap lie, anyhow," laughed Will. "I never knew him to have a diamond, except a finger ring stone that did not cost a hundred."

"But they were not his. They were left with him in trust by a gentleman that is abroad."

"I hardly think my uncle would go into a decline about that. He is able to pay for his losses."

"They cannot be paid for. They are heir-looms, which no money will pay for. He must return the diamonds, or lose his honor. That is what the gossiping ladies say," concluded the count, with an airy wave of his hand. "I do not believe it, of course. I do not believe anything in this country, only what people want me to believe."

"You are certainly very polite, count," answered Will. "I am very much obliged to you. Let the ladies talk, bless their sweet souls. It does them good, and can do nobody else any harm."

"But how about that round?" broke in Mort. "It seems to me that you folks have as long tongues as any of the women."

"I'm on hand," replied George.

"So are we," echoed the others.

"I give myself in your hands, gentlemen," said the count, politely. "You must take very good care of me, for I am a very innocent person."

A laugh followed this sally. In a minute or two more the party had left the club-house, bound in search of more disreputable scenes.

CHAPTER III.

SOMETHING LIKE A ROMANCE.

A WEEK more passed slowly away. On a corner of Fifth avenue, not far from his mansion, stood the broker, Silas Middleton, looking very much out of spirits.

He seemed to have grown doubly gray within the past few weeks, while his face looked thin and haggard. His usual somewhat pompous dignity had vanished, and was replaced by an expression of nervous anxiety.

He had stopped to converse with the wide-awake personage who had been sent for on the night of the party, Mr. John Logan, the detective.

"Do you mean to say that nothing has yet been discovered?" asked the broker, with great anxiety. "Something must be done, Mr. Logan. Employ all the detective force. Set every wheel in motion. Money is no object. It will be fatal to me if you don't succeed."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said Logan, easily. "I have some clews, Mr. Middleton. They are not much as yet, but they are promising. This is a most mysterious affair; it is no common, vulgar business. But I begin to have hopes."

"Ah! you are on the track, then? Who do you suspect?"

"It is too doubtful as yet; I had better mention no names. But when the truth comes out, I fancy you are going to be very much surprised. You would not believe me now if I were to name the party. Wait till I get further proof."

He ceased speaking, and turned quickly as a step sounded near by. The person approaching started slightly on observing the detective's face, but he instantly recovered himself, and addressed the broker:

"Good-morning, Mr. Middleton. How do you do, this morning?"

"None too well, Mr. Duncan," replied the broker.

George Duncan, for it was he, bowed to the detective.

"Good-day, sir. I met you in the smoking-room at Mr. Middleton's party. I had forgotten where for the moment."

He held out his hand, which the detective took.

"I am happy to meet you again," he said.

They conversed in commonplaces for a few

minutes more, after which Mr. Duncan walked on down the street, leaving the broker and detective together.

But the expression of his face changed as he walked away. An uneasy look came upon it, which quickly became hard and implacable. Some muttered words came from his lips.

He walked briskly forward, his indolent manner changing to activity as he proceeded. Soon leaving the avenue he hastened down one of the side streets, looking heedfully behind him as if in fear of being followed.

An hour afterward found him seated in a rather sparsely-furnished apartment, in company with another personage.

The room was adorned with pictures of sporting scenes, ranging from horse races to prize fights, some of them being engravings cut from the weekly papers. Guns, fishing tackle, boxing gloves, etc., aided to stamp the occupant of the room as a sporting character.

This personage, who sat in a well-worn shooting jacket opposite his visitor, wore an aspect of affected gentility which was evidently assumed. His broad and vulgar face had a sinister expression. George addressed him by the name of Tom Spicer.

"By Jupiter, you don't tell me that?" he cried, with an oath. "A spy on our track?"

"As sure as we are living men!"

"And in two weeks more we could snap our fingers at them all. This won't do. We must tap this lark before he salts our soup."

"He's a keen one, Tom."

"So am I!" ejaculated Tom. "Have you a plan? If you have, name it."

A long conversation ensued, at the end of which the confederates rose, took their hats, and left the room.

"You have it, then?" queried George, as they reached the street. "The hour, sharp twelve. The place, corner of—"

"Yes, yes," cried Tom, hastily interrupting. "Name no names or places. You get your work in. I never go back on mine."

They parted with significant looks. George turned his steps toward Broadway. Tom plunged down the East river side of the city, making his way through streets that were anything but sweet and savory.

Two hours afterward found him in a place to which we must follow him.

It was a low, dingy room. Its walls and ceiling had been once white, but were now so covered with stains of beer and other substances as to give them a dirty brown hue. The floor looked as if it had not been scrubbed since the house was built.

A table occupied the middle of the room. It was well supplied with beer and whisky glasses. Around it sat three men, one of them being Tom Spicer.

Yet Tom was hardly recognizable. He had thrown off his gentility, and was dressed in a sort of rough sailor garb, with a knotted blue handkerchief around his neck. The expression of his face had changed with his dress, and he looked like a cross between the rough and the sport.

His two companions were decided roughs. They were hard-faced rascals, with beetle brows, and stubby beards, who looked like fit candidates for the House of Correction.

Yet they had shrewd and unscrupulous faces. They were evidently just the stuff for dark deeds that needed wit and boldness.

"I'm here to put you on the lay," remarked Tom, resuming the conversation, which had been broken by the entrance of a waiter with drinks. "It's nothing to me, but I like to throw a good thing in a good fellow's way."

"You're deuced kind and charitable," growled one of his companions.

"That tike won't bite!" exclaimed the other, with a knowing wink. "Port your helm, shipmate, and take another tack."

Tom sipped quietly at his beer. He knew the kind of stuff he had to deal with.

"It don't make an ounce of difference to me," he calmly said. "I'm only giving you a little opening into the ways of New York society. If you don't see my blind, I'll draw. But, there's a big pool for the lads that's got the heart to chip in boldly."

"Oh! tip that gaff! Stop sailin' round Robin Hood's barn. Come to anchor and show your colors, or we'll vamoze."

"Right for you, Jacob," broke in the other. "I don't like talk that ain't got no backbone."

"You're a jolly pair of muffs, you are," rejoined Tom, looking at them critically. "Wet your lips, lads. I'll let you into the thing, anyhow. I'm going to tell you a little story I've heard. It's a sort of short novel, you know.

There ain't any truth in it. You mustn't think of believing it."

"Oh, no!"

"Of course not!" laughed the ruffians over their glasses.

"Well, suppose, then, there was a rich foreigner in this town. One of the nobility. An Italian count."

"Oh! but that's impossible. There ain't no sich," winked one of the ruffians.

"And two prime jokers, like you, were to snatch that Italiano and nail him in quod. Not to squeeze him, mind. Italian counts don't squeeze well. They ain't lined with cash."

"That's a purty sell you're pumping out, Mister Spicer. Who wants to grab for dried-out lemon-skins?" growled the fellow called Jacob. "Ain't you got no juicier persimmon than that in your bag?"

"Let's get back to our mutton," resumed Tom. "We might let on our Italian count was a favorite in rich New York society. The ladies think he's a jewel of a man. And the men swear he's a jolly lark, of true-blue blood. Well, the count slips out of sight. Then there's a big time in society. Noble blood isn't very plenty on this side—d'ye see?"

"In course we see. We ax a ransom, eh, Jacob?"

"And advertise as we'll slice off his nose and ears if it ain't paid."

"You're lads with ideas," rejoined Tom, with an air of satisfaction. "Society will bleed for its darling count. Ask a good figure, so as to leave room to fall, you see."

"This is prime whisky, Mr. Spicer. It's queer how you kin imbibe them slops of beer. That's a very pretty story you've been telling us."

"Make it all up yourself?"

"You bet. I'm good at that. Why, I could stretch it out a mile long if I wanted. I'll give you the second chapter now. At twelve o'clock or thereabouts, on the night of October 20th—that's only to-morrow night by the by—our Italian goes past the corner of — street. There's only one gentleman with him. Two men jump out sudden from a dark corner. The count gets a hard tap that lays him out. The other gentleman shows fight for a minute, and then makes tracks. He is so scared that he forgets to give the alarm till he is three blocks away. Then he yells out and fetches a policeman. They go back, but there is no count to be found. The noble foreigner has vamozed. The next day the papers are full of the story, and society is all in a stew. Then, a day or two after, there comes an advertisement, offering to set the count loose for a ransom, and promising to lay his nose on the City Hall steps if the cash don't come within two weeks from date. There must be time enough for society to work, you see. What say you to that, gentlemen, for a neat second chapter?" queried Tom, in conclusion, as he emptied his glass.

"It's very gay and pretty," answered Jacob, nodding his head approvingly.

"I never seed nobody with sich an imagernation," broke in the other, with a hoarse laugh. "Robinson Crusoe couldn't ha' told a yarn better."

"But there's a pint or two of fillin' in wanted," rejoined Jacob. "You won't kick ag'in' a hint or two 'bout the make-up of that little romance?"

"We story-tellers are always open. Pile in," remarked Tom, with a grin of satisfaction. "Three heads are three times better than one."

The conversation continued for some time in the same ridiculous strain, the ruffians asking and Tom answering questions with the affectation of its being all a romance.

Finally he rose and pushed back his chair.

"I must say that you are a prime pair of lads, with wide-awake ideas," he remarked. "Why, you've filled out the plot for a very neat novel. Never mind the drinks; it's my treat. Are you going?"

"No, we want to confab a bit more."

"Then suppose I send you up another jorum from the bar?"

"Whisky straight, make it. Look out you don't slip on the stairs, Mr. Spicer."

"I never slip in dark places," answered Tom, significantly. "I know something about navigating, my jollies."

He left the room in high satisfaction. He had succeeded in his object without committing himself. Whatever might happen there was no proof that he was concerned in it. Tom Spicer was sharp enough to look out for number one.

If we may take a quick step forward we will conduct the reader to an hour near midnight of

the next evening, and to a room in a disreputable dwelling on the east side of the city.

The group of persons present embraced those we have met in the club-house, with the exception of Will Emory. Count Ormond was there, and in one of his gayest moods.

The party had been drinking freely, and were ready for any wild freak or adventure.

"This is getting stale, flat and tiresome," cried George Duncan, springing to his feet. "We're wasting the hours of a sweet night in no better amusement than getting drunk. It's just the night to tip over a belated parson. Come, lads, are you in for a frolic?"

"We do like frolics, we sons of blue Italy," answered the count, gayly.

"We're with you, Duncan. Lead the way," came in a chorus from the others.

In a few minutes they were in the street, laughing wildly as they made their way along the nearly deserted thoroughfare, and keenly alive to every chance for mischief.

A half-hour of this sort of amusement, however, brought them into contact with a stern policeman. Some of the party were full of bottle valor enough to try conclusions with this guardian of the law. It looked as if trouble might ensue, and George, who was quite sober, drew the count away.

"Come," he said. "These idiots will get themselves in the lock-up. There is such a thing as going a step too far."

The count followed him with a haste that showed that he did not care to get into that kind of trouble.

They went rapidly forward through streets with which George seemed thoroughly familiar, though they were in the most unfashionable part of the city.

"There goes the policeman's rattle," he remarked as they reached a dark and deserted corner. "Stop here a minute, count. I'm out of breath."

"I do think you have made me walk much too fast," answered the count. "In Italy we never do walk so fast."

"In this country we do not do things in the Italian way, Count Ormond. We have our own time and way for everything."

He put a strong emphasis on the words "time and way." It seemed almost as if they were signal words, for at that instant two dark figures sprang out from the shadows of the corner, and confronted the young roisterers.

"Toll, my larks!" they cried, as they sprang forward, brandishing clubs.

"Back, you hounds!" exclaimed George fiercely, using his light cane to ward off blows.

But the attack had been too sudden for defense. In an instant the cane was dashed from his hand. At the same moment a hard blow fell on the head of Count Ormond, which stretched him senseless on the pavement.

George sprang back from the blow aimed at him, turned and ran.

He continued his course for two or three blocks without giving a cry of alarm.

Here he met a policeman, to whom he told, with an air of great hurry and nervousness, the story of the dastardly assault. They returned hastily together to the point, but in vain. The count and his assailants had disappeared. The only sign of the attack was a large spot of blood, which marked the pavement where the victim's head had struck.

CHAPTER IV.

THE AFFAIR OF THE RANSOM.

THE next day dawned. The newspapers came out full of the outrage of the preceding night. An Italian nobleman, on a visit to New York, Count Ormond, had been waylaid by ruffians; knocked senseless, and spirited away.

Something must be done at once. The authorities must use every means to recover the illustrious captive. What would Europe say if her nobles were allowed to be thus kidnapped in the streets of the great American city?

Some of the papers gave details of the assault—a little colored by the imagination of the writers. According to them the count and his comrade, Mr. George Duncan, had been forced to fight with a half-dozen burly ruffians, until the count was felled by a blow, and Mr. Duncan had to fly for his life.

Much praise was given to Mr. Duncan for his courage, and the promptness with which he brought officers to the rescue, and much surprise that the villains had so soon succeeded in carrying off and concealing their victim.

It need not be said that this news made an immense sensation in the fashionable circles of New York. The count had been received with the warm enthusiasm with which American

society always welcomes a scion of the nobility.

He was everywhere voted a gentleman of charming manners, and so highly interesting, and with such a delightful foreign accent. Society, the ladies in particular, were captivated by the count, and the news of his kidnapping threw all the first families into mourning.

The authorities must act vigorously in this matter, said everybody. New York would be forever disgraced if this outrage was allowed to pass unrevenged. Where were the police authorities? Had they gone to sleep? It seemed so when such an event could take place in the public streets.

The authorities seemed of the same mind. Every means was taken to discover the perpetrators of the outrage. The police were set everywhere at work. All the detective force was called into requisition. A thorough search was made of every locality in the neighborhood where the affair had taken place.

But all was without effect. Not a trace of the kidnappers and their victim could be found. The villains had thoroughly covered up their trail.

"It is outrageous! It is simply outrageous!" cried a fashionably dressed lady, walking the floor excitedly. "The authorities of this city are ridiculously weak and blind. Do you suppose such a thing could be done in London or Paris? No, never!"

"We will be sneered at by Europe!" exclaimed another impatiently. "And with good reason. For a noble visitor to be carried off from under our very eyes! What will Italy say?"

"Italy will say it does not matter much; that she has plenty of counts to spare," remarked George Duncan, who was one of the party, in his cynical tone.

"That is just like you, Mr. Duncan," declared the first lady. "You are always picking at the nobility. Yet we shall have to forgive you, I suppose, for they say you did act with wonderful courage in that dreadful affair."

"That is so," answered George laughing. "I ran away and brought up a policeman, as soon as I could find one. It isn't everybody would have had such presence of mind."

"I won't permit you to depreciate yourself," cried the lady petulantly. "I know all about it. How you fought for ten minutes with six burly ruffians, and were too proud to call for help. And how you did not give way until they had disabled the count, and all set upon you. Everybody is talking about your brave defense."

"I'm sure I ought to be dreadfully obliged to everybody," declared George, with an amused look. "I don't recollect anything of the sort, but I suppose everybody knows, and I will have to give in."

"You are too provoking for anything, George Duncan," exclaimed the second lady. "You know it is all so, and you just might as well admit it."

"I surrender," laughed George. "If people choose to say that I fought with a regiment, and felled fifty of them with a feather, I won't dare to contradict it. Of course I can't be expected to know. But I hope Italy won't send me a box of diamonds for my brave defense of the noble count."

The ladies present looked vexed enough to shake him for his sarcastic tone. He had no business to receive their praise in any such spirit.

But further remarks were prevented by the entrance of another young man, in a highly excited manner. He bore a newspaper in his hand, and his face was flushed with indignation.

"Listen to this!" he cried. "Here is the consummation of the outrage! Listen to this villainous advertisement, which has been put in the *Herald* by the abductors of Count Ormond!"

His excited words created a sensation in the room. The persons present crowded eagerly round him, with the exception of George Duncan, who sat unmoved, with his usual cynical smile on his lips.

The young man read the advertisement in a voice of high indignation. It was couched in the following words:

"If the friends of Count Ormond care to see him again they must take the bloodhounds of the law from our track. The police can never find him, and if they hunt us too close they will get but a corpse. Fifty thousand dollars ransom, and no questions asked, is the price of the count's release. If this amount is not paid in twenty days from date the count's two ears will be laid on the City Hall steps. If not paid within thirty days the count's

nose will be left on the desk of the Police Superintendent. Them is our best terms. Answer by same means. Address, ROAD-AGENT."

This daring advertisement created high excitement in the bevy of ladies. There were sharp exclamations of anger, fright and dismay. They fluttered around like so many wounded birds. Their fans went as if worked by steam. One of them fell on the sofa in a half-faint. The only cool person in the room was George Duncan, who received this startling declaration as if it was an every-day matter.

"What is to be done?" they cried. "This is perfectly horrible! Was there ever anything so cold-blooded? What do you advise, Mr. Duncan? Give us your opinion."

"I suppose the money must be paid," answered George, coolly. "These fellows mean what they say. There is no beating round the bush in that declaration."

"But fifty thousand! Such a preposterous sum! Has the count so much money with him?"

"I doubt if he has it here, or anywhere else. Some of these small nobles are not much better off than our Yankee tramps."

"Small nobles indeed!" cried an indignant lady. "You do beat anything, George Duncan! Do you intend to let a nobleman be mutilated in that horrible manner?"

"I think we had best raise a subscription," suggested George. "I doubt if the count could pay the tenth of it."

"But fifty thousand! Can it ever be raised? Such a sum!"

"Perhaps our considerate friends will be willing to take less. Suppose I insert a counter advertisement, offering twenty-five thousand. You ladies ought to be able to raise that much."

"Yes, yes! Do it at once, Mr. Duncan. We will solicit subscriptions. We will raise it."

After considerable more talk on the subject George's plan was agreed upon as the most feasible one.

He consulted the authorities, however, before putting it into execution. They did not agree with the plan. There had been too much of this buying off crime. They had decided to offer a reward of ten thousand dollars for the capture or betrayal of the kidnappers, and the recovery of the captive.

The next day's *Herald* contained two advertisements concerning the abduction.

One of them was signed by the mayor of New-York city, offering a reward of ten thousand dollars for any information that would lead to the capture of the abductors, and the release of their noble prisoner, Count Ormond.

The other offered a sum of twenty-five thousand, and no questions asked, for the release of the captive.

It was signed "A committee of ladies." George Duncan had declined to insert it, after his consultation with the authorities. But the ladies, who were thoroughly scared by the threats of the kidnappers, and had little faith in the effect of the public reward, had inserted it on their own responsibility.

Will Emory bore the paper containing these two advertisements in his hand, as he entered the broker's house that day for dinner.

Mr. Middleton was seated in the library. He had come in just before, and was very pale and haggard, with a look in his eyes like that of a hunted deer.

It was a look which had come upon him within the past few days. Whatever his trouble it seemed to be gathering more deeply around and over him.

"See here, uncle," cried Will, in an excited manner. "The affair is working. Here is the answer to that detestable advertisement of yesterday."

"I have seen it," answered Mr. Middleton, dejectedly. "That offer of reward, you mean?"

"And this other one of ransom. What is to be done, uncle? The count is your personal friend. It was you introduced him to New York society. What do you propose?"

"He must be rescued!" exclaimed Mr. Middleton, with some show of energy, "and without delay. I don't like that offer of the authorities. It may drive the villains to kill their captive for safety."

"Then how about the other? I understand some of our first ladies have formed themselves into a committee to solicit subscriptions. They are only waiting to see if the abductors accept their offer."

"I will do my share," answered the broker. "If they fall short of the necessary amount I will make it up."

"That is my noble uncle. I knew the count was safe in your hands," exclaimed Will, with enthusiasm.

Further conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the dinner-bell.

The two gentlemen descended to the table, where Will did justice to a good dinner, but his uncle scarcely touched the food. He seemed to have sunk into a deeper depression than ever. Hardly a word came from his lips during the meal.

After dinner they ascended to the smoking-room together.

Will was growing more and more anxious about his uncle's long-continued depression, while his curiosity about the mystery was increasing. He could keep silent no longer.

"Excuse me, uncle," he said, positively, "but something more than a trifling sickness ails you. Something has happened that you are concealing from me. The whole house is full of an atmosphere of mystery."

"That is nonsense, boy!" exclaimed Mr. Middleton, petulantly. "Why will you keep harping on that string?"

"It is more than nonsense," declared Will. "You wish to keep it secret, but it is too late. It is all over New York. Everybody is talking about it."

"Ha! is that so? What are they saying?"

"That your house was robbed, on the night of the party, of some very valuable diamonds which you had in trust."

He looked keenly at his uncle as he spoke. Mr. Middleton started as if with surprise, and flushed deeply in the face. He fixed his eyes irresolutely on Will for a minute, and then quickly arose.

"Come with me," he said.

Will followed, wondering what this meant.

Mr. Middleton led the way up-stairs, and to a neatly fitted up office which he had on this floor adjoining his bedroom. He threw open the door and entered, Will following.

"Do you see that safe?" he asked, pointing to a small iron safe that stood in a corner of the room, and was riveted to a strong stanchion in the wall.

"Yes," said Will, wondering.

The broker threw open the door.

"It is unlocked and empty, you see. When it came here it was locked, and contained some of the most valuable diamonds in this country. The lock is no ordinary one. I have here the key. It has not left my pocket-book, which has not left my pocket. Yet on the night of the party I found that safe open, as you see, and the jewels gone. How it was done, or by whom, is a mystery which neither I nor the police have yet been able even to conjecture."

"And you have kept it secret at the suggestion of the police?"

"Yes," admitted the broker.

Will looked at the safe in bewilderment. He could not understand how it had been entered. But he could less understand his uncle's depression.

"You are haggard with trouble, uncle," he said. "Why? I have known you to meet a greater loss without a change of color."

"If I could meet the loss with money I would not change color now," replied Mr. Middleton. "No money will pay for those diamonds. They are irreplaceable heirlooms, which were left with me on trust. My honor is engaged for their safe return."

"Ah!" cried Will. "This is a serious affair. But why did you accept such a trust?"

"To save myself from ruin, Will. I got myself in a desperately tight place. A friend offered me a loan to tide me over. He had no money to spare. But he was just leaving the city for a trip South, and sent me these diamonds, giving me the privilege to use them as security for a loan. I did so. I pledged them, and saved my business with the proceeds. I was but to return them when called for."

"On what security?"

"My honor. The honor of Silas Middleton."

Will looked at him. He knew what these words meant in the mouth of the sterling man of business.

"Who was this friend?" he asked.

"Pearson Fletcher. He has gone to Havana for his health."

Will started. Something in the name struck him strangely.

"And when are you to return the diamonds?"

"On demand. That was the agreement. The demand has come. I have here a letter requiring their return in twenty days from date."

"But if they are not found?"

"Then I will pay my debt in other coin," said the broker, resolutely. "If I cannot return the

trust, I will give him my dead body. If my honor dies, I die with it. Silas Middleton cannot live disgraced."

CHAPTER V.

IN TIGHT QUARTERS.

WE must return to Count Ormond, and to the night of the abduction. As we have said, no trace of the villains or of their prisoner had been found, although the police had made a thorough search of every suspicious place within several blocks of the locality of the outrage.

There was a good reason for this. They failed to find the missing man, simply because he was not there. His abductors were no new hands at the business, and had not performed their dangerous work without preparation.

The count had received so stunning a blow that he remained senseless, otherwise he would have felt himself quickly lifted into a carriage, and heard the sound of rapid wheels. Still insensible he was soon after removed to a boat, and the carriage rolled away empty.

The boat was rowed out on the waters of the East river. For an hour or more it continued its course, and then put to shore. Another hour found the unconscious prisoner in a place where he was not likely to be found by the police, and from which he would not find it easy to escape.

The next morning had dawned before the unlucky nobleman recovered his senses. He came slowly to his wits, with a dazed brain and an aching brow. His head throbbed as if it would split with pain, and his veins seemed full of liquid fire.

He lay on a hard couch, where he had been left by his captors.

For an hour the injured man lay there, with no very clear idea of where he was, or what had happened. He only knew that he was in bitter pain, and that he was not in his own room.

A dense darkness surrounded him on first awakening. This decreed as the morning dawned. A growing light made its way into the room.

Yet this light did not come through the windows. These were firmly closed. The light came through a narrow transom over the door, which appeared to be the only means of lighting and ventilating the room.

Slowly the mystified senses of the prisoner came back. As his eyes grew accustomed to the faint light he perceived a washstand, with pitcher and basin, at the foot of the bed.

He rose, staggered across to the nearest window, and sought to thrust open the shutter. The effort was in vain. It resisted his strength. The shutter was evidently firmly secured.

For the first time a realization of the situation came to the prisoner's dazed brain. He turned to the pitcher, poured the basin full of water, and thoroughly bathed his aching and fevered head.

The cool water was refreshing, and he dipped his face in it again and again. It seemed to wash the cobwebs from his brain, and a recollection of the events of the preceding night dawned upon his memory.

He recalled the ruffianly assault, the hard blow he had received, the momentary sense of pain, and his heavy fall to the pavement.

From that moment forward everything was a blank. He gazed around the room in which he stood, with eyes of keen intelligence.

"By Apollo and Jupiter and all the rest of the saints," he declared, with a pure English accent, "I'm in for it! They've scored one on me. It's the first time in his life that the count—ha! ha!—ever was caught in a trap like this. And how I am to get out of it is a question not to be settled in a jiffy."

He seated himself on the edge of the bed and fell into a deep train of thought. The cold water had had a remarkable effect in relieving his throbbing head, and he was as wide-awake again as ever in his life.

He ran over in his mind the whole events of the preceding night. The wild frolic, the encounter with the policeman, his departure from his roistering companions in company with George Duncan. Then he recalled their halting at a dark corner, the remark made by his companion, the springing out of the ruffians, and the terrible blow he had received ere he could take any measure to defend himself.

"Where is Duncan?" he asked himself. "Was he served the same sauce? Is he a prisoner in some other room in this house?"

His lip curled, while an expression of doubt and suspicion marked his face.

"I rather calculate not. I fancy that my

good friend Duncan has a deeper hand in this business than he would care to show. Very likely he thinks Count Ormond a good one to get out of the way. And perhaps he is not far wrong. I calculate to be something of a thorn in that young gentleman's side. There's a turn in the longest lane, as Mr. George Duncan may find before this little game is played out."

He was roused from his reflection by the opening of a sliding panel in the door. Something was pushed in and placed on a small shelf fixed on the inside of the door. Then the panel closed with a sharp sound, and low footsteps could be heard retreating.

The prisoner sprang quickly up and approached the door. The room was gloomy, yet enough light came in through the transom to render all objects visible. He perceived on the shelf a small waiter, covered with dishes containing food.

"That's not a bad idea," he muttered. "I've been hungrier in my time; but I may need all my strength, and I can't keep it without eating."

He removed the food to a table that occupied one corner of the room. Here he drew up a chair. There was a moment's hesitation as the thought of poison came to his mind. But he shook his head decisively.

"If it had been that lay I would not be alive now. They had their chances. It is not the corpse game they are operating."

With no further hesitation he attacked the food. Count Ormond was evidently a person of wit and resolution. He was not the man to be scared by a shadow.

If he was an Italian he had learned the Yankee way of eating, for he cleared the platter of its contents with a rapidity that would have done credit to a down-town merchant at his lunch.

Then he rose, heaped the dishes on the waiter, and replaced the latter on the shelf.

"I might as well take things easy for them," he muttered. "They've got the upper hand now. A wise prisoner cultivates his jailer. It will be time enough to show my teeth when I get a chance to bite."

He seated himself again, twirling his chair around on one of its hind legs, while his keen glance slowly made the circuit of the room.

"If I was a green hand I might waste time in trying windows and doors," he remarked. "But I recognize the kind of stuff I am dealing with. When they put me here they meant to keep me here. I know that the den is as tight as a penitentiary without wasting time in trying to find out."

Bathing his face again to relieve the feverish heat which still burned in his veins, he flung himself on the bed, in as careless a manner as if he had given up all hopes of escape.

He lay for an hour, the pain in his head slowly mitigating. At the end of that time he fell asleep.

He failed to perceive that the slide had again opened, and the remains of his breakfast been removed. A dark, scowling face, and a pair of fierce eyes, were visible at the opening, investigating the room. They fell on the motionless form of the prisoner.

"By the jolly jumpers if he ain't snoozin'," growled the observer. "Well, he's a cool one, anyhow. He ain't no baby, ain't that Italian count."

He closed the panel and withdrew. The sound aroused the sleeper, who drew a long breath, and lifted his head.

"Had another call, eh?" he said. "I must try and manage a chat with that gentleman. It will be agreeable to know what's in the wind."

The count rose from the bed, arranged his disheveled clothing, and stretched his limbs by a few active gymnastic movements.

Then he walked across the room. It was not to try the strength of door or windows, however. He was satisfied on that point. His steps were directed to a closet that occupied one corner of the room.

The door of this was locked, but that made him only the more desirous to investigate its contents.

Taking a piece of wire from his pocket, he bent this in a certain manner, and inserted it at the keyhole. Within two minutes the lock was turned and the door came open.

It was plain that this was not Count Ormond's first experience in opening locked doors.

The closet was a rather deep one, and contained a considerable variety of articles. It seemed to have been used as a sort of rubbish hole, for its contents were mainly what would be called trash.

Yet the count was in search of something that

might aid him to escape, and he was not the man to let anything pass unquestioned.

He removed the contents of the closet, piece by piece, heaping them on the floor behind him. They were mostly articles of worn-out clothing, though there were old bottles, boxes of antiquated papers, pieces of wood, wire, tin, some rusty awls and pincers, and a general assortment of similar articles.

A pair of torn pantaloons which he lifted seemed unusually heavy. He thrust his hand into the pocket and drew out something at sight of which his eyes brightened.

It was a rusty revolver, that had apparently been carelessly left in the pocket of the discarded article of clothing.

Securing this the prisoner hastily threw back the remaining objects into the closet, closed the door, and set himself to an examination of his prize.

His eyes had now become so adapted to the dim light that he had no difficulty in his task.

His first object was to see if the weapon was loaded. A quick inspection settled that point. The chambers were empty.

Then he tried the lock. There was some difficulty in opening it, and a peculiar click that did not sound natural to his experienced ear.

He pulled the trigger. The lock failed to move. The instrument was evidently out of order.

"The mystery's out now," he said to himself. "The concern is broken, and has been flung in the closet as useless rubbish. It is lucky that I know something about the merits of a revolver lock. If it is all there I bet I make it work."

But it was now near the hour of noon. His jailer might come at any minute with his dinner. The cautious prisoner concealed his prize, and waited events.

He seated himself on his chair, lifted his heels to the table, and tilted the chair back on its hind legs, in a very easy and self-possessed attitude.

He had not very long to wait. Steps sounded in the passage, and in a minute after, the panel was shoved back, and the face of the keeper appeared at the opening.

He fell back a step as he encountered the keen eyes of the captive, fixed upon him with a searching look. The easy self-possession of the count's attitude also took him by surprise.

The sharp eyes of the shrewd prisoner read the ruffianly face before him as if it had been a printed sheet. He saw there considerable vigor and resolution, and a mingled wit and stupidity. The fellow was one that would need careful handling.

"Good-morning," said the count, in his easiest manner. "Glad to see your delightful countenance. Got a fresh supply of provender, eh?"

"I've brung you a bite of dinner," stammered the villain, rather abashed at this reception. "We ain't a-goin' to starve you."

"Well, that's kind. I hope you've brought some cigars. It's confounded slow work here, without a smoke to while the hours away."

"Here's your grub," growled the fellow, thrusting his waiter through the wicket. "There weren't no orders 'bout cigars."

"Nothing against them, eh?"

"I reckon not."

Then suppose you buy me a few. I've got a trifle of cash yet."

"Don't mind 'bliging a gentleman," muttered the man in reply, mentally deciding to make the count pay well for his cigars.

"I hope there ain't any orders against telling what's in the wind. I am kind of curious to know what I've been brought here for, and what's to be done with me."

"I don't know nothin' about it," was the surly answer. "That's the boss's business. He didn't let me in."

"All right, my good fellow. Here's the silver for the cigars. Fetch them so I can have my after-dinner smoke. There's nothing like taking life easy, you know, in all situations."

"Well, I'll be shot if you ain't a cool 'un!" growled the jailer, in a tone of some admiration. "Guess maybe you'll have plenty of time to take it easy."

A knowing grin came to his lips as he closed and locked the sliding-panel.

"That game's started," muttered the count. "Now for dinner."

A very appetizing lunch had been sent him, and he sat and enjoyed it as coolly as if at the table of some first-class hotel.

As the jailer had said, the prisoner was evidently "a cool one."

He had just finished when the keeper returned and thrust him in the cigars ordered.

"There's no change," he muttered. "Cigars is dear, out this way."

"That's all right. Have you any matches?"

"Matches is ag'in' orders."

"Give me a light then. That won't break any orders."

The fellow struck a match, and held it to the cigar which the count thrust through the aperture.

A few whiffs, and it was lighted.

"Much obliged," said the count, easily. "I'll do as much for you some of these days. It's sort of close quarters in here. You don't always keep your windows shut."

"Only when we get birds like you in the cage," answered the fellow, with a laugh.

"All right, old lad. But you don't know what a quiet, docile chap I am. If you'd leave that door open I wouldn't think of walking out."

"Oh no! In course not," laughed the jailer, as if he thought this a very amusing joke.

"Here. Suppose you take this truck away. I'm done dinner."

He handed out the dishes, and then coolly seated himself, puffing away at his cigar. The jailer gave him an admiring look as he closed the wicket.

"A doosed cool 'un that," he muttered.

"Got my first work in on that coon," said the count, to himself. "I'll twist him round my finger yet, if the pistol don't work. My next game is to investigate that funny little instrument."

CHAPTER VI.

THE WORK OF AN AMATEUR LOCKSMITH.

COUNT ORMOND seemed to know thoroughly what he was about. He was not long in separating the pistol into its several parts, although it was badly rusted and clogged with hardened oil. The aid of the pincers found in the closet, and a knife-blade used as a screw-driver, enabled him to do this.

Then he closely examined the several parts.

"All right here," he muttered. "Everything is in good shape. All the trouble is in the lock machinery. If there's nothing lost or broken there, I'll soon have the affair in working order."

Yet it proved no easy matter to take the lock apart. Rust had invaded its machinery. Its oil had clogged and hardened until it was like stone. With only his knife-blade as a screw-driver, it was impossible to start the screws.

After ten minutes of useless labor, in which fear of breaking the blade checked his efforts upon the screws, the prisoner laid down the lock, sat back, and drew nervously upon his cigar for several minutes.

"If that fool had only given me some matches I might burn off the gum and loosen the joints by heat," he muttered.

He reflected for a minute and then sprung to his feet.

"There's nothing impossible," he declared. "I may be able to get a blaze."

Repairing to the closet, he took from it several old newspapers and pieces of rag. Tearing a piece from one of the rags, he rent this into minute shreds. Then, by aid of the pincers, he tore these into fibers, until he had a heap of fibrous material almost as fine as tinder.

He looked at his work with satisfaction.

"That ought to kindle easily," he muttered, as he drew vigorously on his cigar.

Then, holding the lighted end of the latter to the fluffy mass, he soon had it burning, lines of fire running along the separate fibers into the heap.

Some judicious blowing made the fire more active, and after a few minutes of careful work he had the satisfaction to see a fine blaze spring up in the mass.

"Good!" he cried triumphantly, as the blaze ran rapidly through the heap of fibers. "That part of the job is done. Now for the next operation."

For want of anything better he had laid his combustible materials on a piece of board he had found in the closet.

Now laying fragments of paper and rags on the burning fibers he soon had a clear and hot blaze.

In this he held the lock by means of the pincers, turning and twisting it until every portion of the iron had been touched by the keen tongues of flame.

The prisoner laughed with satisfaction as he continued his labor.

"I hope my gentleman friend outside won't pay me a visit just now," he said. "He'd be something surprised to see this little bit of industry. Brains are the best tools after all."

He continued until the lock became very hot, and all of its gummy material burnt into dry ashes. Then grasping it with the pincers, he

again made an effort to turn the stiff screws. This time they yielded. That first turn in the screw which is the sign of conquest was gained.

Laying down the pistol, with a smile of triumph on his intelligent face, he proceeded to extinguish the flames, pouring on it water from the basin.

There was one difficulty which could not be avoided. The room was full of the smell of burning, while a light smoke was slowly curling through the transom.

Fearing a visit of suspicion and possibly a search, he gathered up the wet cinders with his hands, rolled them, with the remnants of scorched paper, into a ball, and wrapped them closely up in a piece of rag. He next cut a slit in the bottom of the mattress of his bed, and thrust this tell-tale ball deeply into the straw.

The rest of the material he threw back into the closet, while the partly scorched board was thrust under the heap, with its burnt side downward.

His hands were much blackened, but it was not safe to wash them in this condition, lest the grimy water should tell the tale of his operations. Hard rubbing with a piece of rag took off most of the soot. He now thrust the pistol and pincers into a crevice he observed in the wood-work of the closet, and finished by relocking the door with the aid of his bent wire.

The shrewd prisoner contemplated his work with satisfaction. His hands were yet somewhat soiled, but this an application of water removed.

He finished by lighting a fresh cigar and resuming his seat, with his former air of careless satisfaction.

"I fancy I have pretty well covered up my tracks," he remarked. "It depends on how sharp these fellows are whether that confounded smell will sell my plan or not. I hope they are all out of the house."

The smoke gradually made its way through the transom. The strong smell of burning slowly weakened as it disseminated itself. A half-hour passed away. The count's confidence returned as the source of the smell grew each minute less evident.

A short time more passed, and then the sound of heavy and hasty steps were heard in the passage. There was none of that ca-like tread which the keeper had used before.

The panel was thrown open and the face of the ill-looking ruffian appeared, full of anger and suspicion. He was about blurting out some question, but his quick-witted prisoner got ahead of him.

"I'd like to know what this means?" cried the count, springing to his feet with an air of assumed indignation. "Are you trying to smoke me out, you rascally reprobates? Here's the room stifling with the smell of burnt rags, or some such truck. Hang your picture, if you have such stuff as that to burn, why can't you shut your doors and keep the smoke out of the house?"

The fellow was decidedly taken aback by this assault. The count's indignation seemed so real that he hesitated, stammered, and finally broke out:

"There's nothing been burning," he ejaculated. "The smell comes from this direction, and the house is full of it. I can smell it strong now in your room."

"So can I," declared the count; "I'm nearly smothered with it. The next time you have any burning to do, get something that don't smell so rank."

"But I tell you there's been nothing burnt," persisted the fellow. "It smells as if something had been burning in your room."

The count stared at him with an air of surprise, and then burst into a sarcastic laugh.

"So there has been," he declared—"those confounded weedy cigars you brought me. Isn't there anything better than cabbage leaves in this neighborhood?"

The sharp prisoner had completely gotten the best of his keeper. The latter attempted a confused answer, knowing that he had bought the cheapest cigars, and finally withdrew somewhat hastily, thinking that he must have been mistaken about the source of the smell.

A sly laugh came from the count's lips, but he made no effort to recover the weapon; it was not safe yet. In fact, he let the rest of the day pass without doing so. There was no hurry, he told himself.

His caution was wisely taken. Near night-fall the fellow returned, bearing his supper. Instead of pushing it through the panel as usual, he unlocked the door and entered the cell.

"I've been ordered to search the room," he declared, in a tone of apology. "There's been

no fire below, and the boss says as somethin' must be wrong here."

"All right," said the count, easily. "Peg away. I don't see as I have any sort of objections."

He seated himself coolly to his supper, while the suspicious fellow made a thorough round of the cell, sniffing everywhere, and turning up and examining all articles. He tried the closet-door, but as he found that locked, he paid no further attention to it.

Fortunately for the captive the rank smell had now nearly disappeared, and it was no stronger there than elsewhere through the house.

With apparent heedlessness of this search, the count proceeded to discuss his supper. He had not been without the idea of making a break for freedom; but he had no weapon, while his keeper held a sort of bludgeon, and it was probable that there were assistants below. The prisoner, therefore, continued at his supper, with no sign to show that such thoughts had passed through his head.

"Got through?" he asked at length.

"Yes."

"Find anything?"

"No."

"Thought you wouldn't. Here's my supper-dishes. Much obliged for your kind attention."

The fellow took up the dishes and left the room, with an air as if he felt that he had been intruding. But he hesitated for a minute at the door, and then threw back the panel and looked in.

The count had thrown himself on the bed, and was stretched out at full length.

With a muttered apology the fellow closed the wicket again and retired.

"So far good," muttered the count. "That ugly business is settled. But, it is not safe to make any other move till to-morrow."

He passed that night in a sound sleep. If he had been in his own bed and in perfect freedom, he could not have slumbered more soundly. His confidence in himself had fully returned.

The next day, after finishing the breakfast which his keeper brought him, and safely rid of that gentleman's visits for several hours, he proceeded with his interrupted work. He was more anxious for the result than might have appeared from his deliberate movements.

Recovering the pistol from the place where he had hidden it, he applied himself to remove the started screws from the lock. They yielded now easily, and he quickly had the lock in pieces.

He examined the pieces critically, and with an air of experience. A single minute sufficed to show him what was wrong. The trouble was with the spring. But it was not broken. It had simply slipped out of place. All the other parts were in good order.

"That disease is as good as cured," he remarked. "It is lucky I know the make-up of a pistol lock."

But there was something to do before putting it together. He carefully scraped the rust and burnt oil and gum from the parts, finishing his work with a scrap of emory paper which he had found in the closet. Then he oiled it all with some butter which he had saved from his breakfast. This done, he put it together with the ease of an expert.

He tried the spring. It worked satisfactorily. With a smile of triumph he proceeded to manipulate the other metal parts, and to brighten up the rusty barrel with his emory paper.

A few minutes more sufficed to put the revolver together. He tried the lock. It worked to a charm. He had fashioned for himself a very useful bit of machinery.

Completely satisfied with his work, he replaced the weapon in his hiding-place in the closet, and locked the door.

It was utterly useless in its present state. His wit had served him well so far. But he now needed to call other resources into action.

When the attendant appeared at noon with his dinner to his surprise he found the prisoner seated with his face bent over the table, holding both hands to his cheek, and groaning as if in great pain.

"What's the matter?" asked the fellow, curiously. "Be ye sick? Want some whisky, or summat of the sort?"

The count looked up with a very woebegone face.

"It isn't that," he groaned. "It's toothache. I'm half-wild with a jumping tooth. I'll go crazy if I don't get something to stop it."

"Try tobacco," suggested the keeper, with some sympathy. "That's mighty good."

"It won't work on me," declared the count. "There's only one thing I ever found of any use."

"What is it? I'll get it fur you. I know somethin' 'bout jumpin' toothache, you bet! Been thar myself."

"It's gunpowder," groaned the count, pressing his hands to his face again. "There's nothing else touches it. Fetch me some of that, won't you, for a good soul? Here's money. Bring me a quarter's worth. I want to stuff my mouth full."

Without a shred of suspicion the fellow retired. The shrewd captive paid no attention to the dinner, but continued in his disconsolate position until the humbugged keeper returned.

"Here's the stuff," he said, passing in a paper parcel. "I hope it'll do you good."

"I know it's just the thing for a fellow fixed like me," answered the count.

He opened the package and thrust a large pinch of the gunpowder into his mouth.

"I'll be ready for dinner in a little while," he remarked, closing his lips heroically on the unpleasant remedy.

The keeper continued to look at him curiously. Five minutes passed. Then the count sprang up.

"I feel fifty per cent. better already," he declared. "Gunpowder always touches the right spot. I'll try to eat now."

He got through his dinner like a man who had never known what toothache meant, and returned the dishes to the attendant.

"If it comes back on me I'll give it another dose of powder," he remarked.

Yet the fooled fellow had hardly closed the panel ere the count sprang joyfully to his feet.

"It's my turn now, my hearties, or I know nothing about human nature," he gayly declared.

In a few minutes he had recovered the revolver. One further point was needed. He had pistol and powder. Bullets were wanted.

But this was a trifling difficulty. Getting the board he had before used from its hiding-place, he proceeded, with the aid of a sharp knife, to cut some pieces from it and round them off to the size and shape of a bullet, fitting them to the pistol barrel. Two or three hours' steady work served for the manufacture of a half-dozen well-shaped bullets of hard wood. He had found some pistol caps in the pocket with the pistol, and was now fully provided.

A few minutes sufficed the expert prisoner to make a series of cartridges, and to load his weapon. He thrust it into his pocket with an odd smile. The game was in his hands.

Yet something more was to be done. As the hour when he expected the keeper with his supper approached he proceeded to the bed mattress, thrust his hand into the opening he had made, and regained the ball of burnt rags.

This he opened and scattered the charred fragments on the floor, directly under the panel of the door.

A strong smell quickly arose.

By the time the attendant appeared the smell of burning again permeated the room. The fellow snuffed suspiciously on opening the panel.

"What's that!" he cried. "Shoot me if there ain't that blasted smoky smell ag'in."

"There's no use making such a row about a bit of burnt paper," answered the count.

"Burnt paper! Who's been burnin' paper?"

The fellow hastily unlocked and opened the door. A cry of surprise and anger came from him as he perceived the blackened tinder on the floor.

"How come that thar?" he cried furiously.

"What the blazes are you up to?"

"This," answered the count. "I've concluded to leave this place. And I'd advise you to behave very nicely if you don't want to get a worse toothache than I had to-day."

"An exclamation of alarm burst from the fellow's lips as he looked up. There was good reason. A cocked and leveled revolver was staring him in the face. And behind it was an eye that meant business."

CHAPTER VII.

A SCARED PACK OF VILLAINS.

THAT the ruffian was thunderstruck need not be repeated. But stupid and easily humbugged as he had shown himself he was not wanting in boldness and resolution.

He stood between the prisoner and the door, and with a fierce oath he sprang toward the latter.

The count did not move a step. But a keen flash shot from his eye, his pistol hand steadied itself, and his finger lightly pressed the trigger.

There was a quick flash, a sharp but not loud

report, and the astonished keeper felt a twinge of pain in his ear.

He thrust his hand up hastily, and it came back covered with blood.

"That's only to show you that the thing will work," remarked the count, calmly. "You are right sure now that it isn't a dummy?"

"You bet," stammered the cowed villain.

"Very well. If I pull the trigger again, I'm afraid you will lay down for a long rest. I only touched your ear that time to let you hear what I had to say."

"Deuce take you fur a confounded cool 'un!" growled the discomfited rogue. "Where'd you git that thar revolver, hey?"

"Lead on," answered the count, haughtily. "And try no tricks, mind you. You lent me the powder to load the pistol. So I won't shoot you except it is necessary. No more prattle now. Lead on."

With a suppressed oath the villain did so, the count following him too closely to permit any tricks with the door.

He followed along a passage and down a flight of stairs. They found themselves in a hall, with several doors opening into it.

With a grin of cunning the guide opened one of these, and immediately sprang within it, out of pistol-shot.

"Wake up thar! Didn't ye hear the barker?" he shouted. "He's nailed me, and bu'sted out!"

There were two men in the room, the same precious pair of worthies that Tom Spicer had made his villainous bargain with.

They sprang up, with violent oaths, at this alarm, and made as if they would rush for the door. But the appearance of a resolute face there, and a hand bearing a cocked and presented revolver, bade them pause.

"You dirty dog!" cried the count to his betrayer. "I'd keep my promise of putting a bullet through you if you were worth a pinch of powder. But I guess I'll save what bullets I have for these gentlemen. Hold fast, there, my hearties, or somebody will get hurt!"

The ruffians had not waited for this order to check their steps before the leveled revolver. They turned their eyes furiously on the fooled keeper.

"Where did he get that barker?" demanded the one called Jacob. "Have you let him humbug you, you dead beat?"

"Save your breath to cool your porridge," suggested the count, calmly. "I'm here, and that's the interesting point just now. I just stopped to bid you good-by, as I always like to walk out of a man's house decently."

The ruffians looked at one another with a furious meaning in their eyes. Then they sprang simultaneously forward, determined to risk everything in the recapture of their valuable prisoner.

The pistol cracked. Once, twice. Jacob fell to the floor, with a hole through the fleshy part of his leg. His comrade hastily retreated, as a ball went clear through his hand.

"No bones broken, I hope," remarked the count coolly. "You can plaster up those holes. But, don't try it on again, or plaster won't work. You hear that, Jake Clark and Toby Myers?"

"How the blazes did you get our names? Who are you anyhow?" cried the ruffians together.

In reply the count put his hand to his face. He manipulated for a moment. When he took down his hand his whiskers and mustache had disappeared. He went through the same movement with his hair, and a black wig came off in his hand.

There stood before them a man with close-cut brown hair, and a face that had been clean-shaven, though it was stubbly now for want of the razor. It was a clear-cut, sharply-intelligent face, with eyes that blazed like two diamonds.

A cry of surprise and consternation broke from the villains.

"The Ferret!" ejaculated Jake.

"Invincible Logan, or I'm a donkey!" growled Toby, with an oath of astonishment.

"It seems you gentlemen know me," quietly remarked the transformed count. "Maybe you know it's not safe to try any of those sudden movements again. I have three more wooden bullets in this pistol, and they are good for three corpses. Just tie up your wounds, for I fancy there is some bleeding going on. Then I want a short chat with you."

He stepped into the room, and quietly took a chair, laying the pistol across his knee. He was as easy and unembarrassed as if these were three of his special friends.

He was in no danger from them. They

seemed thoroughly frightened, as much so as if a lamb had suddenly turned into a tiger before them.

The next ten minutes were devoted to dressing their wounds, which were bleeding freely, though not dangerous. No bone or artery seemed to have been touched.

"See here, my slippery fellows, I don't mean you any harm. So you needn't be scared. I'm a hawk that's flying for higher game than you, and if you'll tell me the truth you shall go scot free, for this. You took Count Ormond. The count has stepped out, and Jack Logan the Ferret has taken his place. Now I want a clean breast of it. Who put you up to taking the count? And what were you to do with him?"

Jake looked at him with a sour face, though a very uneasy one.

"Mought ha' known we couldn't keep you," he muttered. "Thought it was only an Italian count. Every fool knows as the Ferret's slipperier nor an eel. Wasn't goin' to do the count no harm, anyhow, 'cept to slice off his ears and nose if the ransom wasn't forked over."

"The ransom, eh? So the count's put to ransom, is he?"

"Fifty thousand. With the privilege of fall-in," growled Toby.

"That's rich! Who's working this neat little game, my hearties? It's too heavy a job for such as you."

"Now don't you ax us that, Ferret," urged Jake in a pleading tone. "You wouldn't want us to split, now, would you?"

"If you don't answer every question I ask you I'll have all three of you under lock and key before you're two hours older," was the stern answer. "And I'm not the man to fool with. You know that. Who employed you in this job?"

"Tom Spicer's his name, and that's all I know 'bout him," averred Toby.

"Tom Spicer, eh? What do you know about him, Jake?"

"Nothin', 'cept he's a sportin' kind o' spark as has guv us jobs more nor once. Dunno where he lives or what's his biz. But he wears store clothes and cuts a swell. It's him that's workin' this boodle. We're only in fur our share of the plunder."

"You can swear you know nobody but Spicer in the business? You've seen or heard of nobody else? The truth now, mind you!"

"There's nobody but Spicer. I'll swear that."

The detective, into whom the assumed count had been so quickly transformed, now rose to his feet.

"The business has got down to this shape now," he said. "I want this job to go on. Count Ormond won't be seen in New York. He's in your hands yet, mind you. You can pump that into Spicer's knowledge tank. Let him go ahead with the ransom business. What was to be your share?"

"A thousand apiece and five hundred for Bill here. We're to do all the work, and the big 'uns to finger the cash. But we had it in our heads to bleed a bigger pile outer them."

"All right. If the ransom is paid you are good for your share. Work your game well and report to me every move, and you won't go empty-handed. But don't try any trick on me if you don't want to be salted down."

The Invincible's eyes were fixed on them with that searching glance which they occasionally assumed. His tone was stern and threatening. The trio of villains, who would not have shrunk from any common crime, were completely awed by the look and tone of this individual. They knew the power that lay concealed in that quiet frame.

"You understand?"

"Yes."

"You are my men now?"

"You bet!"

"I will take care of you. I never break my word."

He turned with these words and walked away without taking the trouble to look back. He had no fears of a treacherous assault. The Ferret, or Invincible Jack Logan, as he was known to the law-breaking fraternity, was not the man that it was safe to play a trick on.

A few steps brought him to the front door of the house. It was yet daylight, and a quick glance around him gave him a full knowledge of the locality. He knew New York and its environs as clearly as if he had a map of the region in his brain.

The spot on which he stood was isolated, and not far removed from the waters of the East river. Brooklyn lay spread out before him to the east, and across the waters rose the spires of the great city of New York.

He continued to gaze until he got the location

of the solitary house well fixed in his mind; then he set off at a brisk walk for the city, thrusting into his pocket the pistol which had done him such good service.

All was silent in the house behind him. Its occupants had not ventured to follow him to the door. They had their wounds to nurse.

An hour afterward found the Invincible in New York. He had gone through a strange experience since he last trod those streets, and it was with a feeling of renewed confidence in his own powers that he reflected on the shrewdness of his escape.

In all his varied experience he had never before been in such a scrape.

Another hour brought him to the headquarters of the detective agency.

It was about nightfall, but several persons were yet present.

"Hello, Invincible! Where have you been?" was the question. "We began to think you had got into trouble."

"Been working up a little affair," he replied, briefly. "Look over your books and see if you have such a name as Tom Spicer on them."

The person addressed did so, and shook his head.

"Not here," he remarked.

"He's a new bird, then, for our cage. I must trail him before to-morrow night."

At this moment the door opened, and a young man, in the dress and with the appearance of a laborer, lounged in.

"Ha!" cried the detective, "just the man I want to see. How goes your work? Have you anything to report?"

"Very little," was the reply, as he threw off his coat and washed his hands. "I tracked him this morning to a place on Franklin street. It isn't the sort of shanty for a fashionable visit. Nor is it quite a low-down hole."

"Find out to-morrow whom he visited there. And keep your guard sharper than ever. Have you left a night watch?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Good-night."

Logan left the office and made his way toward his home. He had yet to report himself there.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DETECTIVE'S EYESIGHT.

In following the adventures of the disguised detective we have lost sight of our other characters. We must now return to them.

We left Will Emory when he had just been advised by his uncle of the desperate strait he was in, and the terrible determination he had taken to kill himself rather than lose his honor.

Will made no effort to combat this desperate intention. He was completely taken aback by what he had heard, and wanted time to think before acting.

The name of Pearson Fletcher, as we have said, gave him a start. He did not know the person, but he had heard the name before. There was a story of some kind connected with it, but he could not remember what.

For a whole day he thought incessantly on the subject, trying to recall the story. He was sure it was something unpleasant, and that the names of Fletcher and Middleton had been somehow connected in the past. But think as he would he could not bring it back. It was something he had heard in his early years.

Will was not satisfied. What he had heard had made him restless and uneasy. He knew well that his uncle meant what he said, and that arguments would be wasted on him.

What was to be done then? The detectives had the case in hand, but there was no sign that they were doing anything. Will felt that if he wanted to do anything to save his uncle from suicide he had better turn amateur detective himself. Perhaps he might hit on something that had escaped the officers.

Full of this resolution he sought his uncle's office. It remained just as it had been left on the night of the robbery. Nothing had been changed or moved.

Will looked heedfully around him, examining every point with the utmost care. Yet there was not the slightest sign that anything had been disturbed. The papers in the pigeon-holes and drawers of the desk remained neatly tied up. Others were loosely scattered over the table, just as they had been left when they were last used.

He searched among these, picking them up one by one. As he did so there fell from the folds of one paper a small, three-cornered scrap, of about an inch in width.

It seemed to have been torn from the corner of a letter or other manuscript. But his quick

eye at once detected that the writing on it was in quite a different hand from that of his uncle.

He examined it closely. The writing was unknown to him. He finished by putting it in his pocket, with the hope that it might lead to something of value.

He continued his researches, but nothing came from them. Whatever the detective had traced, there was nothing suspicious to his inexperienced eyes.

Finally he came to the safe, as the last and most important object to be examined.

It remained unlocked. Mr. Middleton had acted on the plan that there is no use in shutting the stable door after the horse is stolen.

Will studied this object with the utmost diligence, bringing all his wits to bear on the investigation.

There were several scratches on the paint near the lock, which seemed to have been made by some sharp-pointed instrument. Everywhere else, inside and outside, no sign of disturbance appeared.

Will examined the tell-tale scratches critically. It seemed evident to him that the burglars had no key to the safe, but had opened it by the aid of instruments, some of which had slipped in the process.

"They must have been very expert hands," he said, rising to his feet after concluding his search. "They couldn't have had much time to spare for their job, and a lock of that kind isn't to be opened by every greenhorn. Yet it is plain that the work has been done by burglar's tools."

"Sure of that?" asked a satirical voice behind him.

He turned quickly, and perceived standing in the door of the room a man about thirty years of age, a stranger to him. Yet the face seemed familiar, and he immediately remembered that it was the person who had accompanied Mr. Elkins to the smoking-room, on the memorable night of the party.

"Excuse me," said Will, straightening himself a little stiffly. "Whom do you wish to see? Mr. Middleton is not at home."

"So I was told at the door," was the easy answer. "So you think that safe was opened with burglars' tools, eh? I fancy you are mistaken in that idea."

Will stared at this intrusive stranger. He must be known to his uncle, or he would not have been admitted to the party. Yet he seemed to have plenty of assurance.

"I have seen you before, but I do not know you," remarked Will coldly. "My name is Will Emory. Will you be kind enough to give me yours?"

"Here is my card," answered the intruder.

Will took it, and read the inscription with an opening of the eyes.

"John Logan, Detective."

"What? You the Invincible?" he cried hastily. "That changes the aspect of the case. I begin to see through things now. Have you discovered any trace of the robbers, Mr. Logan?"

"No," was the answer.

"It is highly important they should be found. My uncle is in a desperate strait."

"I know it."

"Have you no hopes of success?"

"Hopes, yes. Assurance, no. So you think those scratches were made by the slipping of the tools of the burglars?"

"Yes. Were they not?"

"There are no scratches around the keyhole. Yet it was there the work was done. Does it not seem strange that a workman who was so skillful at this point was so awkward at that?"

"That seems reasonable," said Will thoughtfully.

"And the number of these scratches seems overdone."

"I see. But why were they made?"

"As a mere trick, to throw men of my stamp off the scent. Unluckily for the rascal he overreached himself. His scratches have put us on the scent instead of throwing us off."

"I declare I don't see how," acknowledged Will. "They don't tell me anything of that sort."

"I suppose not" laughed the detective. "You are no fool, Mr. Emory, but you are not trained to the best use of your eyes and your brains in this work. I know that you are Mr. Middleton's nephew, and that you are interested in the success of this search. Therefore I do not mind telling you what I make of those marks. It may be possible that you may aid me in my work."

"I am eager to do all I can," replied Will, earnestly. "I will do anything to save my uncle from his desperate resolution of suicide."

"Of what?" cried the detective, in surprise.

"Why, you told me you knew of his desperate determination."

"I didn't know of that. That is a serious business. What has driven him to such madness?"

"His honor is bound up in the loss of those diamonds. You should know what honor means to men of his reputation."

"I see. I see," rejoined Mr. Logan. "The diamonds must be found, or he must be watched until he comes to his senses. I am glad you told me that. It is important I should know. It will go no further. Now shall I tell you what I make of those scratches?"

"Yes. I am eager to know."

"In the first place they have been made as a lure. They are intended to give the idea that the safe was opened by tools. As it is they give the opposite idea, that it was opened with a key. No tool could have been used without leaving some mark on the keyhole."

"Go on," demanded Will.

"In the next place it was not done by a skilled hand. It is overdone, you see. An old burglar would have made the marks in the right place, and not so many of them. And he would have made them with lock-picking tools."

"And what were those made with?"

"A pocket knife," was the quiet answer.

"And they have been done hastily, as if the fellow was in a hurry. Now, I will tell you what I deduce from this. The man that opened that safe was no professional picklock, but a green hand at the business. Some friend or acquaintance of Mr. Middleton, I take it, who knew of the contents of that safe, and who had the means of getting at the key in Mr. Middleton's pocket. The work was done hastily, on the night of the party, perhaps by one of the guests, but that is not certain. And these marks were left to lead search into a wrong track."

"That sounds plausible," admitted Will. "But the key was in my uncle's pocketbook, and was found there, in his pocket, immediately after the discovery."

"The work was not done with that key," said the detective, quietly. "The key has been stolen, a duplicate made, and the original returned. It is a very neatly concocted trick. But it has weak spots through which sharp eyes can see."

Will looked thoughtfully at the safe, and then into the knowing face of the detective. His eyes had been considerably opened in the past ten minutes.

"Safe locks are not so easily opened as that," he remarked.

"There is nothing difficult about this one," answered the officer. "The question is, who is in a position to be able to get that key from your uncle's pocket and return it without discovery? Are there any doubtful persons about the house who could be used for this work?"

Will shook his head.

"The servants are all old and tried hands," he affirmed.

"I have had them watched," admitted the detective. "I can discover nothing suspicious about them. None of them has held communication with doubtful parties. However, they are still under watch. It is our business to neglect nothing. I have also been looking after another person whom I doubted at first. But I have given that up. I am satisfied on that point."

"Who is that person?"

"One Will Emory. He is a gentleman who would have had easy access to his uncle's pockets. But I accept him now as an aid instead of a suspect."

Will whistled. He had had no idea of this. The keen eyes of the detective were fixed with their most penetrating gaze on his face. But he saw there only surprise, and not a trace of guilty confusion.

"I am ready to do my best to help you," declared Will, with great earnestness. "I would almost lay down my life to save my uncle's honor. But I am afraid I will not be able to do much. I have had my eyes opened considerably in the last half-hour, and see that I am as green as a gosling in this work."

"You have your wits," replied the detective. "And you know many things that I don't, such as your uncle's habits, his associates, the events of his past life, dozens of things which I have not come at, but which may have a meaning in this business. You may be able to set me on the right track by a mere hint. I am used to the work of expanding hints."

Will reflected. There recurred to him his late effort to remember the story about Pearson Fletcher. But that was too vague to speak of,

Yet the detective's words made him more than ever anxious to recall that lost memory.

"I will think that over. I have nothing to say now," he replied. "But you have not been idle. Do you suspect any one?"

"Yes. And I have some reason to think I am on the right track. But it is possible I may be chasing the wrong fox. I must get nearer the mark before I can speak. There is this much sure, I am on the trail of some ugly work, which I think points to your uncle.—Well, is it settled, Mr. Emory? Are we to be associates in this search?"

"Yes," rejoined Will earnestly. "And to begin with I may as well submit to your better judgment the one suspicious token I have found. Just now, while turning over the papers on the desk yonder, a torn slip dropped from one of them. And this slip is not in Mr. Middleton's handwriting, but in a strange hand, which has no counterpart in any of those papers."

"Ha! that may be important!" exclaimed the detective. "Let me see it."

Will took the slip from his pocket and handed it to the detective, whom he watched as he examined it with intent interest.

"The words on it tell no tale," he muttered. "It has been part of a letter. I knew you were a man of wit, Mr. Emory. You have beaten me at my own trade. This little slip of paper may be of no value, and it may be the clew that will lead us to the mysterious robber. Can you manage to examine your uncle's papers privately?"

"Yes. But I will do nothing of the kind."

"Only to discover some other trace of this handwriting," pleaded the officer. "We must learn, if possible, who wrote those words."

"That is a different matter. I will do that."

"Good-day, then. I am glad I met you here. I would rather have your aid than that of a half-dozen detectives. They would only work in my own track. You may lay open a new path."

Mr. Logan withdrew as he spoke. Will, left alone, at once began to examine the papers in the desk and compare them with the slip. His effort proved in vain. No trace of a similar handwriting was found.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WORK OF AN AMATEUR DETECTIVE.

WILL EMORY and his uncle were seated at the dinner-table. The meal was over, but they had not yet risen, and were toying with their after-dinner coffee.

For five minutes not a word had been spoken. Mr. Middleton was still care-worn and haggard, yet did not show the extreme depression of a day or two before.

There was a thoughtful look in Will's eyes as he played with his spoon.

"I cannot help thinking of what you told me the other day," he said. "Who is this Pearson Fletcher, uncle? I never saw him in your house, and did not know you had such a friend."

Mr. Middleton started slightly at this abrupt question. He shrugged his shoulders meaningly.

"You are a young man yet, Will. It is not likely that you would know all my friends. Business men have intimate friends besides those they invite to their parties. Mr. Fletcher is not a fashionable personage."

"Yet it is strange I never heard you speak of him."

"You never heard me speak of Thomas Jones, Thompson Westland or Hiram Corlish. Yet they are all friends of old standing."

"Are they men who would press on you a loan of a half-million dollars' worth of diamonds without security?"

"That is nonsense, Will. The diamonds are worth no such sum."

"At any rate, it is strange that Mr. Fletcher made you this loan. Business men don't run risks with persons in difficulty."

"He knows me. He knew I would come out all right," remarked the broker.

Will smiled. He was satisfied that his uncle was parrying his questions. There was evidently something that he did not care to tell.

"I have heard the name of Pearson Fletcher before," he said, quietly. "There is something unpleasant connected with it. I wish I could remember what."

"It is best you should not. It is not wise to open old sores. I will tell you this much, Will. The diamonds loaned me were to some extent a peace-offering. They were a pledge that an old trouble was settled and forgotten. This is why their loss affects me so deeply," he continued in a very sad tone. "I will not bear it, I will die

rather than lose my honor. I have twenty days' grace. If I am not able, at the end of that time, to redeem my pledge, I shall not be living to tell it."

He rose hastily from his seat, and turned from the table, as if to prevent further questioning.

"You shall do nothing so foolish and desperate if I can help it," exclaimed Will, firmly, as he, too, rose and grasped his chair with a nervous grip. "As for the diamonds, I do not despair of their recovery. I had a talk yesterday with Mr. Logan, the detective, and—"

"With Logan, the detective! Impossible!" ejaculated Mr. Middleton, turning back in surprise. "What nonsense is this, Will Emory? I do not understand you, sir!"

"What is impossible in that?" asked Will, in yet greater surprise. "There is nothing strange that Mr. Logan should talk with me, knowing my interest in the matter."

"It is impossible, I tell you. You have been deceived, or are trying to deceive me. You could not have seen Mr. Logan, because he is— But that I am pledged not to tell. If anybody has presented himself to you as John Logan, he is a liar and a cheat. Take care you don't trust in him or reveal any secrets to him. There, that is all I am free to say."

He left the room hastily. Will stood in a flurry of astonishment. What did all this mean? That he could not conjecture. Was it possible the man who had talked with him the previous day was a cheat, a spy, perhaps, sent to get information from him? He was not willing to think so. There had been too strong a flavor of honesty about the man. Yet what meant his uncle's surprise and excitement? And what was the pledge he had made?

Will turned petulantly away from the table. The affair was too confoundedly mixed for his liking. It was not easy to find an end to the tangled skein. But there was one thing he had in mind, and that was to learn more about Pearson Fletcher than his uncle seemed willing to tell.

He left the house at once, and sought a place where he could see a Directory. It was Will's plan to strike while the iron was hot.

Turning the pages of the Directory, he sought the name of Pearson Fletcher. He found it without difficulty.

There was no house address. He evidently lived out of the city. But it gave his office number as 46 Blank street.

Will's next move was to seek the Elevated Railway, and to run down-town in search of the locality in question.

He knew little about the street, and was curious to learn what kind of a business Mr. Fletcher conducted, and his standing as a business man.

He found it to be a short street, lined on both sides with large buildings, many of which seemed to be broken up into offices.

No. 46 was one of these office buildings. There was a long signboard at the door, covered with names and directions. Will examined this carefully, but, to his surprise and disappointment, the name he sought was not there.

Had Mr. Fletcher changed his office since the date of the Directory? There was one way to find out. He entered the building and sought the janitor.

He found the latter personage engaged in tidying up a rear office on the first floor.

"Mr. Fletcher?" he said, in response to Will's question. "Yes, he had an office here. He gave it up about a month ago. It is occupied now by Mr. Corlish."

Will recognized this name. It was one of those given him by his uncle as an old business friend.

"Where has Mr. Fletcher gone? I presume he has taken a new office."

"No, sir. His health was giving way. He has gone on a trip to Cuba, I am told. I don't know as he needed an office. They say he has lots of money."

"Ah! Rich, is he? What was his line of business?"

"Coffee. A kind of agent for Cuban plantations. I thought you knew him."

"No. But I am anxious to. I am interested in Mr. Fletcher just now."

"Happy to accommodate you, if I could," said the talkative janitor, flourishing his brush. "But Mr. Fletcher was a gentleman of very few words. I know nothing about him, except that he paid his rent regular. Maybe Mr. Corlish could tell you something. He seems to know him."

"Ah!" said Will. "Is Mr. Corlish in? What is the number of his office?"

"You will find him in room 10, second floor."

Thanking the janitor for his information, Will sought the room in question.

He found Mr. Corlish to be a small-sized, oldish man, with a wrinkled but good-natured face. He was seated at a desk, busily writing. He wheeled round on his chair, and faced Will with a look of inquiry.

Excusing himself for his intrusion, Will at once opened the subject of his errand.

"Pearson Fletcher? Certainly. I know him well. He was my predecessor in this office."

"And Mr. Silas Middleton?"

"One of my old friends. Mr. Middleton and I have known each other well—let me see—thirty years, at least. What can I do for you, young man?"

"I am Mr. Middleton's nephew."

"Ha! Glad to know you, I'm sure."

"You know about the diamond robbery?"

"Who don't? It's an odd business."

"And of course you know that the diamonds belonged to Pearson Fletcher, and were merely loaned to my uncle."

A change passed over the face of Mr. Corlish. It was not surprise alone. There was something more than surprise in it.

A quick exclamation came from his lips.

"He loaned them to Mr. Middleton without security, to be kept in trust until his return from Cuba."

"I see," remarked Mr. Corlish. "Mr. Middleton's integrity is well known. I would trust him with my whole fortune without security. But I had not heard of this before."

"But that is not what I want," responded Will. "Excuse me for troubling you, Mr. Corlish, but I hope you will have time to answer me a question or two?"

"Fire away. I'll tell you when I hear the questions."

"There is something about Mr. Fletcher I would like to know. I heard it long ago, but have forgotten. He has had relations of old with my uncle—unpleasant relations, I fancy. Can you tell me what they were?"

"You are mistaken, young man; there has been nothing of the kind. Mr. Fletcher is a young man, not ten years older than yourself. I never heard that there was any intimacy between him and your uncle."

"Ah!" exclaimed Will, sadly disappointed; "then I am mistaken, that's all. I am sorry to have troubled you."

"There was some trouble between the fathers of these two persons," continued Mr. Corlish, with an air of reflection; "but that was forty years ago, when I was a mere boy. Old Middleton was not the man his son is. He was an overreaching old rascal, if you'll excuse me for plain speaking. Fletcher's father was then a gosling, green in business. He trusted his cash in old fox Middleton's hands, and got fleeced for his pains. That was a bit of the old time roguery. It is said he swore revenge, but he never got it. The old coon was too wide-awake to be caught napping."

"Thank you. I remember now. That was the story I had forgotten. I must have heard it spoken of when I was a child."

"There were some queer things said after Fletcher died," continued Mr. Corlish, like a man that was wound up, and was bound to finish his tune. "Old Middleton died before him, but his son stepped into his business. They say that Fletcher swore his son to revenge on the Middletons. Whether it is true or not, I won't affirm. All I know is that Silas Middleton did the honorable thing. He paid to young Fletcher his father's losses, with interest. That buried the hatchet. The thing has been dead and forgotten these ten years. Mr. Middleton won't bear to hear it mentioned. It is a sore point to a man with his sense of honor."

"Dead, but not forgotten," quoted Will.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I believe that Pearson Fletcher has not forgotten his oath of revenge, and that he is in some way at the bottom of this diamond robbery."

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Corlish, springing from his chair as suddenly as if he had been flung up by a spring. "That is an extraordinary suggestion! Extraordinary! And it is utterly impossible! How could he have done it? The man is in Havana. He sailed from this port two weeks before the night of the robbery. I saw him off myself."

"He may have returned."

"Impossible."

"Why impossible? There has been time enough to go to Havana and return."

"Your theory is a very neat one, but it will not hold water, young man," answered Mr. Corlish, with severity. "It is not safe nor law-

ful to accuse men of reputation of crimes without a particle of proof. A surmise is no proof."

"But you say it is impossible that he could have returned. I do not see that. He could have gone over to Florida, if necessary, and returned by sail."

"I say so because I can prove what I say," returned Mr. Corlish, sternly. "I have here a telegram from Mr. Fletcher, which was sent me from Havana on the night of the robbery. A man cannot be in two places at once. And here is a letter from the same party, which came to hand to-day. You can see that it has the Havana postmark. The writing I know well to be that of Mr. Fletcher."

Will's face sunk at this information. The quick theory he had built up on learning of the oath of revenge vanished in the face of the new information. As Mr. Corlish had said, a man could not be in two places at once.

"He might have employed an agent," faltered Will, as he held out his hand for the letter offered him.

"Pearson Fletcher is not fool enough to put himself in the power of a villain. Your theory will not hold water, young man."

"I fear not," answered Will, dejectedly, as he dropped his eyes to the letter he held.

A sharp exclamation burst from his lips, and a quick start gave indication of sudden and deep excitement.

"What is the matter?" demanded Mr. Corlish.

"That hand-writing!"

"What ails the hand-writing?"

"See here! Are they not the same?"

He drew a scrap of paper from his pocket and placed it beside the letter. It was the scrap he had found on his uncle's desk.

"Yes, they are the same. That is Mr. Fletcher's writing. Where did it come from?"

"From Mr. Middleton's desk! In his house-office! In the room where the safe containing the diamonds was placed! I found it myself, in one of the papers on his desk. It was dropped there, I believe, on the night of the robbery!"

The two men looked at each other with staring eyes. In Mr. Corlish's there was a startled surprise. In Will's there was a mingled hope and triumph.

CHAPTER X.

THE DETECTIVE ON DUTY.

WHILE these affairs were going on, that of the ransom for Count Ormond was in progress. It was evident that the captors of the supposed nobleman had kept their promise to the detective, and that the main villains knew nothing about the escape of their prisoner.

An offer to pay a ransom of twenty-five thousand dollars within twenty days, was made and accepted, through the columns of the *Herald*. It was agreed that the money should be given to some trustworthy detective, as agent in the transfer, and that the latter should pledge himself to act honestly by both parties.

This bargain made, the work of raising the money proceeded. The ladies who had started it went diligently to work. They were all society ladies of wealth and influence. The capture by brigands of a nobleman in the streets of a city, stirred up society as it had never been stirred before, and the work of collecting the money went briskly on.

Such collectors as these could not be repulsed, and in less than a week's time the ransom was nearly made up.

At the end of this period one of the fair collectors called on Mr. Middleton, book and pencil in hand, and wearing enough jewels to have paid the ransom herself.

"We want but one thousand more," she pleaded with the broker. "And, think of poor Count Ormond languishing in prison for the want of a paltry sum like that! And with danger of a horrible mutilation if it is not paid!"

"Some people consider a thousand dollars a considerable sum," said the broker, dryly. "Particularly, sober republicans like me, who don't take much stock in Italian counts."

"That will not do, Mr. Middleton. It was yourself introduced the count to society. He is a friend of yours. You are jesting with me."

"He is my friend as a man—not as a count," replied Mr. Middleton, smiling. "For the sake of the man that is in him, I don't mind putting my name down for five hundred on your neat little book."

"Make it a thousand, Mr. Middleton!" spoke a voice in the door of the office. "You will lose nothing by it."

The broker looked up in displeasure at this interruption, but he sprang to his feet with a

cry of astonishment on recognizing the figure that stood there.

"You? Is it possible?" he exclaimed. "Will told me he had seen you, but—"

"You are detaining the lady," said the newcomer, pointedly. "Tell her to put down your name for a thousand."

Mr. Middleton still stared at the speaker in open-eyed astonishment.

"Yes—certainly," he cried. "Put me down for a thousand, Mrs. Wilson. The gentleman is right. Make it a thousand."

"Many thanks, my dear sir," said the lady, beaming on him with a sweet smile. "And a thousand thanks to this gentleman for his excellent suggestion. Can we have the money to-morrow, sir? We hope to release Count Ormond from his terrible position immediately."

"Certainly. Any time you wish."

"With one proviso," said the new-comer.

"What is that, sir?"

"Simply that Mr. Middleton has the privilege of selecting the detective who is to act as the go-between."

"Well thought of," exclaimed the broker, catching at the idea. "A good suggestion. I fancy I can find the man."

"There will be no objection to that," answered Mrs. Wilson, sweetly. "Any one named by Mr. Middleton, I am sure—Good-day, gentlemen. I see you have business. And I am eternally indebted."

She bowed herself out, politely escorted to the door by Mr. Middleton.

He returned hastily, with a look of wonder yet in his face.

"John Logan!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible? I as good as told Will he was a liar when he said he had seen you."

"It was Count Ormond those fellows captured," answered the visitor, easily. "They might have kept him. But when he became transformed to John Logan, detective, it was a different affair. Your nephew told you the truth; I have been out of their hands for a week."

"But, how about this ransom, then?"

"Oh, bless you, the ringleaders in the plot don't know that their bird is out of the cage. Who they are I don't know yet. But I am bound to know. I have my hands on the little fish, but the big fish are yet swimming too deep for me. The ransom is a bait to catch them."

"Aha! Who are they? What do you suspect? What is the real meaning of this outrage?"

"That is what I want to find out. It may be only a vulgar game to extort money. Or it may be a deeper scheme. The villains may have recognized me as a disguised detective, and taken this move to get me out of the way. I fancy the diamond robbers are at the bottom of the plot!"

"You don't tell me that!" exclaimed Mr. Middleton. "And you suspect somebody. You told me you did. Who is the guilty man?"

"I can name no names. I have no proof yet. But I am on the right track. Wait till I unearth this scheme."

"I cannot wait," cried the broker, with stern impatience. "I have now but twelve days in which to recover the jewels. I must have them by that time, or—something serious will happen. I have pledged myself to return the diamonds on the honor of Silas Middleton, that never yet was tarnished. I have sworn to return them on demand if alive to do so. See here, sir. Read this. Here is the demand."

He thrust into the detective's hand, almost with violence, an open letter.

The latter proceeded to read it, while the eyes of the broker were fixed on him with deep eagerness and impatience.

It is not necessary to give the words of this letter. It was dated at Havana, Cuba, some ten days before. It stated that the writer felt benefited by his short stay, but that some important business required his presence in New York on a certain date. He would be back and would call on Mr. Middleton for the diamonds loaned on the 25th of the month. It was absolutely necessary that he should have them on the evening of that day, for important family reasons.

The epistle was signed "Pearson Fletcher," in a peculiar hand, that seemed familiar to the detective, though he could not place it.

The conversation continued for some minutes longer, after which Mr. Logan turned to go.

"I have found but the one clew," he said. "That relating to the capture of Count Ormond. The parties concerned in that have baffled me as yet, though I have used every art at my command to discover them. I suspect the ringleader, but have not yet been able to nail him.

The matter of the ransom remains. That is a net into which they must fall."

"Then let it be put through without delay. Every day now counts. There is one thing more. You engaged that I should choose the detective who is to deliver the ransom and receive the prisoner. Who am I to choose?"

"You may choose John Logan, alias Count Ormond."

Mr. Middleton looked at him with a stare of surprise.

"Well, I declare," he exclaimed. "That will be a queer complication. So you are to pay the ransom for your own release, and be handed over to yourself. I don't see how you will manage that."

"It will be something of a job," smiled the detective. "But I have done worse ones. Trust me to work it out."

He took his leave with these words, leaving the broker much encouraged by the result of this unexpected visit.

The shrewd detective smiled to himself as he made his way through the streets. He felt resources within himself far deeper than the broker dreamed of.

"Every man to his business," he muttered, as he made his way to the cars.

A half-hour afterward found him at his office. Here he looked over some letters that awaited him.

He was interrupted in this by the entrance of the young man in the dress of a laborer, who has already been introduced to the notice of our readers.

The detective looked up with an air of inquiry.

"Any luck?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"What?"

"I have learned who our man visited in the Franklin street den."

"Ah! His name?"

"Tom Spicer."

"I knew it!" with an air of satisfaction.

"That completes the chain. Look out, George Duncan. All is not plain sailing before you. Well, Harry, what else? Is Tom Spicer shadowed? Who is he?"

"I never saw him before," replied the spy. "Joe thinks he has twigged him, but don't remember where. A sporting character is Mr. Spicer. He bets on horses and backs pools. I have set the boys to look up his record on the turf."

"That's right. Anything more?"

"Duncan called on him last night," continued the spy. "He was tracked to Spicer's room. They had a long talk. This morning Spicer set out early. Joe followed him but got thrown. He is a keen one, is Spicer. Joe ain't no fool, but his man played the back door trick."

"He smells the rat then? No matter, his trail will be taken up again. There are eyes at the other end of the line."

He rose and took his hat.

"I must look after this business."

"Any further orders, Mr. Logan?"

"No. Keep up your guard. But take care you are not suspected. It will never do to scare our foxes from their work. Lay Joe off the job. If he has been twigged he is not safe."

He walked from the office, and into the street, making his way down-town toward the ferries.

Here he crossed to Brooklyn, and proceeded westward through the river streets of that city.

Ere long he had left the thickly built up portions of the city behind him, and reached a region where the houses were alternated with open lots.

This region passed he emerged into a space of partly open country, whose houses were very thinly scattered.

He turned his steps toward one, yet at some distance, which stood alone at a point not far removed from the waters of the East river.

The place looked deserted. Not a soul was visible. The lower shutters of the house were closed. There was a show of neglect in the high weeds that grew plentifully around it.

The detective did not need a second look to recognize it. It was the house in which he had spent two days as a prisoner.

He gazed over the fields between him and the house. Not a sign of life appeared. The weeds that grew everywhere gave the place an aspect of solitariness.

The detective gave a peculiar whistle.

Almost instantly a head appeared, just visible in a clump of ironweed. The eyes turned swiftly in all directions.

The signal was repeated.

The form of a tall man arose where the head had been seen. He walked with long strides toward the detective.

"Anything?" demanded the latter shortly, when the man came within hearing.

The latter jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the house.

"In there now," he said. "Came ten minutes ago. A sailor-looking chap. Blue rig. Blue handkerchief. Put on. A baby could see he's no sailor."

"Come," said the detective briefly.

He led the way toward the house, walking steadily forward.

Yet he watched it with the eye of a hawk. Every nook and corner, every door and window, was keenly noted.

They had reached within a hundred feet of the house when a low "hist" came from the lips of the spy.

Instantly the two men sunk into the weeds and disappeared from sight. They had vanished as suddenly as though they were but shadows.

At the same moment the door of the house opened, and a man stepped out. He was dressed, as had been said, in a rough sailor's garb. He stood for a moment speaking to a man who had accompanied him to the door.

Then he turned and walked away, passing the concealed men so closely that he could almost have touched them. It was the face of Tom Spicer.

Not for ten minutes did the spies move; then a cluck of satisfaction came from the detective's lips.

"Twiggled!" he declared. "I know my man now. Tony Bender, as I'm a sinner! He shoved the 'queer' in Chicago two years ago. I have him under my thumb, and can crush him like a fly if he kicks."

CHAPTER XI.

THE END OF THE FIRST TRAIL.

FIVE minutes after the disappearance of Tom Spicer, the detective knocked at the door of the solitary house. The spy was not with him. That sly individual was, in fact, tracking Tom Spicer through the environs of Brooklyn.

His knock brought no response. He repeated it, after waiting for several minutes. All remained dull and silent.

"It is plain I haven't the signal," he muttered. "That was an oversight. But I fancy I can make a signal that will bring an answer."

He drew from his pocket the pistol by whose aid he had escaped from that house, pointed it at one of the upper windows, and fired.

There came a sharp report, followed by a loud crash of broken glass.

Almost instantly a head was thrust out of the window fired at, while a fierce oath came from the lips.

"What the blazes is up?" came the furious exclamation. "By thunder and lightning! I'll split—Hallo! It's you, hey?"

"I reckon so. Hard to make you fellows hear. Slip down, Toby, and open the door. I want to chat with you."

The head was withdrawn into the room. In a few minutes there came a fumbling at the door. This was thrown open, and the villainous face of Toby Myers appeared.

The detective looked at him sharply.

"Where's Jake?" he asked.

"Inside. Coming in, Mr. Logan?"

"Yes."

He walked in with as much indifference as if he was coming among friends, instead of into a house occupied by desperate foes who had every reason to hate and distrust him.

A few steps brought them into a room where stood Jacob, with a surly frown on his ugly countenance.

"Kind o' rough, fir'in' pistols into a fellow's house," he growled.

"If the pistol hadn't brought you I'd fired a ten-pounder next," coolly remarked the detective. "But that isn't the point. So you've had a visit from Tom Spicer?"

"You know that?" in surprise.

"I'd be a poor sort of detective if I didn't know all trifles of that sort," answered Logan. "What did he want? Did he find out that the bird had flown?"

His keen eyes were fixed on their faces, seeking an answer in their expressions.

"Not much," laughed Toby. "We ain't quite sich goslin's. He don't smell nary rat. Didn't even ax to see the count."

"What brought him here, then?"

"Jist general supervision, that's all. The big gun wants a report, and the go-between is come after it. He says as how the ransom affair's in good shape."

"Right. It will be ready to pay over in a few days. You are good for your share. But you must be ready to hand over the count to order."

"Dunno how that's to be did."

"Maybe we can manage it," laughed the detective. "Sit down. Let's talk it over a bit."

A chat of a half-hour succeeded. It was like a watch dog consulting with a brace of wolves. But John Logan knew thoroughly what he was about, and the men he had to deal with. His boldness was a point in his favor. It aided to cow the villains. But the fact that he was working in their interest was his main point of safety. They knew well that John Logan was a man of his word.

At the end of a half-hour he left them and returned to the city. The plot was fully laid. Only its execution remained.

Two days afterward it was announced in the *Herald* that the ransom was ready to pay over, and asking how the transfer should be made.

The reply came in the shape of an ill-written and spelled letter demanding that the transfer should be made through a detective to be chosen by the kidnappers. He should come alone, to a place to be named. He would be watched, and if he brought any one with him, or laid any spies, the affair was off. If he came alone, and brought the cash, the count would be released.

"The plan is accepted. Name your detective," read the next advertisement.

"Jack Logan, the Ferret. Time, the 20th October," came the answer.

"It is a bargain. The plan is accepted. Communicate hour and place by letter."

These advertisements consumed several days. It wanted but two days of the date named when Logan received a letter, in a more cultivated hand than the preceding one, but evidently disguised.

It laid down more fully the plan of the kidnappers, which was skillfully devised to prevent any treachery on the part of the authorities. It ended by saying that another letter would be received on the afternoon of the 20th, stating the hour and place of the transfer.

Logan laughed on reading this.

"Cute in them," he remarked. "They are not going to give me a chance to lay a trap in advance. They don't think it safe to trust a detective too far. But wouldn't they be slightly surprised if they knew the neat little trick that awaits them?"

He dropped his head on his hand, and fell into a train of reflection.

"This is not all plain sailing," he said to himself. "I wish I could go to the bottom of the scheme. Let me see. There can be no question that Count Ormond was suspected by George Duncan to be a spy. He was got rid of accordingly. But it is not sure that Duncan's game is the Middleton diamonds. If it is, then the diamonds are put well out of the way, or the count would not be released. If not—then who has the diamonds—and what other rascally game is afoot?"

He was interrupted in his reflections by the entrance of the laborer-like spy.

"Spicer has been at work this morning," he announced. "He has been traced to Mr. Middleton's place of business. He was shown to the broker's private office, and was closeted with him for fifteen minutes. After he came out he went to a bank and afterward met George Duncan in a saloon in one of the down-town streets. They talked for an hour, and then parted. I left terriers on their track, and came to report."

Logan sat with his chin resting on his hand, looking intently into the speaker's face. He sat thus for a minute or two without a reply. Then he sprung quickly up and seized his hat.

"That looks like daylight ahead," he remarked. "I must see what's in the wind at once."

He left the office, and walked at a brisk pace to the establishment of the broker.

It was a busy place, a dozen clerks being actively engaged.

"I am afraid Mr. Middleton cannot be seen just now," came the answer to his request for an interview. "He has important business, and gave orders that he was not to be disturbed."

"He will see me. Take him in my card," replied the detective.

The clerk did so, and returned with the answer.

"This way, sir. Mr. Middleton wishes to see you."

He followed, and was ushered into a well-

appointed private office, in which sat the broker at a table desk, which was thickly strewn with papers.

Mr. Middleton was intently examining a paper that lay before him. He lifted his head on hearing the door open, and politely motioned his visitor to a chair.

His eyes were fixed on the detective with an eager questioning, though he said nothing until the clerk had retired and closed the door behind him. Then he spoke in a half-whisper.

"What is it, Mr. Logan? You are here with some purpose? You bring me news, good or bad?"

"No," answered Mr. Logan, in his quiet tone. "I come to get, not to give. I am in search of news, good or bad."

"Ah! I do not comprehend."

"You had a visitor two hours ago."

"I have had a dozen. Whom do you refer to? What is the party's name?"

"I fear that would be no clew," laughed the officer. "The man has as many names as fingers. The person I refer to is a stoutish individual, of medium height, with a long nose and small eyes. He wears a sandy chin-whisker; dresses rather loudly, in a sporting fashion. Not hard to distinguish from your sober business visitors."

The broker nodded his head, with a gesture of surprise and doubt.

"Your description is unmistakable. He has been here. William Wilson is the name he gave."

"A new one. Put on for the occasion."

"Ha! Then what am I to understand by this? Is there anything wrong about the man?"

"I rather fancy so. What was his business with you, Mr. Middleton?"

"Perfectly legitimate. It was simply to place with me some Chicago and Rock Island stocks. I have had negotiations with the gentleman before. We concluded the bargain to-day. He delivered the stock certificates and received my check in payment."

Mr. Logan looked interested.

"How much, may I ask?"

"A good round sum. Fifty thousand."

The detective whistled.

"Is there anything wrong, Mr. Logan?" asked the broker, uneasily. "The transaction was a regular business one. I got the stock at a fair figure, but not below the market. Do you fancy they were obtained by foul means?"

"Have you the certificates here?"

"Yes. Here they are. Nothing crooked in them that I can see."

Logan examined the documents with the keenest scrutiny. He looked up after a minute.

"Have you any other Rock Island stock?"

"Yes."

"I would like to compare it."

The broker left the office, and quickly returned with a bundle of stock certificates. He was growing more uneasy.

The detective cast his eyes on the papers unfolded before him, and placed them side by side with the other papers.

He continued his scrutiny for several minutes. He raised his head at length, with a satisfied look.

"I thought so. Forgeries!" he said.

With an exclamation of surprise, the broker sprung forward and snatched up the papers. He scrutinized them closely.

"You are mistaken!" he declared, emphatically.

"Not at all. See here."

One by one he pointed out slight discrepancies in the documents, until after some difficulty, he brought the broker to his way of thinking.

"It is extremely well done," he remarked. "Spicer never did that work. It is beyond him."

"Spicer?"

"Yes. Bender, or Wilson, or any other name you wish. He has a good assortment. But this is not his part of the job. It is his business to shove the queer. The manufacture was done by another hand. I think I know the artist."

Mr. Middleton turned uneasily to the clock. It marked the hour of five.

"He left here shortly before three," he said. "He was anxious to get the money before the bank closed. I sent one of my young men with him to identify him, as they would not pay that sum to a stranger. Wait a moment."

He touched a bell. An attendant entered in response.

"Has Jones gone yet?"

"He is putting his coat on to go."

"Send him here."

A well-grown youth, with an intelligent face, entered a moment afterward.

"You went this afternoon to the bank to

identify a person with a check. Did he get the money?"

"No, sir. We were too late. The bank door closed one minute before we reached it."

"That will do," said the broker, calmly.

The youth disappeared.

"That game is discounted," he continued. "I will stop payment on the check."

Mr. Middleton was beaming with satisfaction. It was the detective who wore a cloud on his face.

"You have saved your fifty thousand," he remarked, gloomily.

"Yes—thanks to you."

"And—lost your diamonds!"

"Eh? What do you mean by that?"

"That I have been on the wrong track. I have been trailing a pair of villains and have tracked them to the wrong hole."

"But I do not understand you, Mr. Logan," faltered the broker.

"What I mean is this. On the night that the diamonds were stolen, I fixed my eyes on my man. As Count Ormond I followed him up. He suspected me and had me kidnapped, and that only confirmed my idea. I have just learned that I have been mistaken. It is clear now that his game was the making and placing of these counterfeit certificates, not the disposal of the diamonds. And the ransoming of Count Ormond was delayed till this job was consummated. He wishes to finger the ransom, too."

"May he not have stolen the diamonds also?"

"Possibly; yet I doubt it. Few men would handle two big jobs like these at once. I must look for another trail."

CHAPTER XII.

A TRAIL OPENED AND A TRAIL CLOSED.

THERE was a doubtful, dissatisfied look on John Logan's face as he stood on the wharf of one of the Jersey City ferries, waiting for the next boat to take him over to New York.

In a minute more the boat entered the slip, and soon its passengers were streaming off. The detective stood quietly aside.

One of the landing passengers stopped sharply before him, turned, and held out his hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Logan? I have been wanting to see you. How goes the hunt?"

"Bad—very bad, Mr. Emory. To speak plainly, sir, I am in an ugly quandary. The man I have been following is not the man I want. He is at criminal work, but not of the diamond color. I am off the track and utterly in the dark."

"That is a bad business," declared Will, shaking his head gloomily. "The diamonds will be called for this day week, according to the demand in Fletcher's letter. I know my uncle's temper. I fear the worst consequences."

"He must be watched," declared the detective, energetically. "I trust to you to remove every weapon from his reach. See if there is any poison in his room. Report everything to me. I will manage to put one of my men into his house. He must be stopped in this mad freak."

"I will do all I can," rejoined Will. "Yet it is hard to stop a desperate man."

"What have you been doing? We were partners in this job, you remember. I have lost my hold. Have you struck any sign?"

"Nothing," said Will. "I had a suspicion, it is true. But it has fallen through. There is nothing in it."

"What was it?" asked the detective quickly. "I have traced the handwriting on that scrap of paper."

"Hal! That may lead to something. Whose is it?"

"Pearson Fletcher's."

The detective started, while a look of hopeful intelligence came into his face.

"By Jove, I like the look of that. You say there is nothing in it. On what grounds?"

"The first is that my uncle is in correspondence with Mr. Fletcher, and the corner of a letter may easily have been torn off and fallen on his desk."

"Very true. But Fletcher may have torn up a doubtful letter of his, which he found among Mr. Middleton's papers, and carelessly dropped a scrap. What is your other reason?"

"Simply that Fletcher was in Havana at the date of the robbery. I have seen a letter from him; also a telegram sent on the night of the theft."

"On the same night? That is a strange coincidence. Coincidences are often suspicious. Were those received by your uncle?"

"No. By a mutual friend of my uncle and Mr. Fletcher."

The detective stood looking at him quietly, as if revolving the thing in his mind.

"Is that all?" he asked. "Have you discovered anything more?"

"Yes. I have learned a little bit of old-time rascality, relating to the fathers of Middleton and Fletcher. It has troubled me a little. Maybe it may mean something to you."

"Relate it."

The boat had now left the slip on her return trip. The two men stood alone. Will told the story he had heard from Mr. Corlish. He further related his uncle's demeanor when questioned about his relations with Fletcher.

The detective listened to him with a quiet and grave look.

"What do you think of it, Mr. Logan?" asked Will, curiously.

"As one door closes another opens. There are infinite possibilities in your story. I see work before me. Where is the office of this Mr. Corlish? I must see him at once."

While they were speaking another boat had come in, and the passengers were hurrying past them.

Will answered by a slight exclamation, as he lifted his eyes.

"As I live, there is Mr. Corlish now! That short gentleman just leaving the boat. Another coincidence, Mr. Logan. I will introduce him to you."

But he was prevented from doing so by a circumstance of considerable importance to the two men who were observing it.

Just as Mr. Corlish came near them, another personage, a tall, slight-built man of dark complexion, who wore his hat well down over his face, brushed hurriedly past, elbowing the gentleman before him rather rudely.

Mr. Corlish turned, with an exclamation of annoyance, and looked the man who had disturbed him angrily in the face.

But his expression changed instantly to one of surprise.

"Hillo!" he cried, sharply. "Pearce Fletcher, as I'm alive! Well, when did you get back?"

"How d'ye do, Corlish?" said the other, still pushing on, and with a sour look on his face.

"Just off the Havana packet. Glad to see you. Excuse me. I'm in a hurry to catch the train."

The two men passed on. Will and Logan stood looking after them.

"Another strange coincidence," remarked Will, with a meaning look.

"There's more than plain sailing in this," answered Logan, hurriedly. "See if any Havana packet has come in, Mr. Emory, and get a list of her passengers. I have business on the same train that this dark-skinned gentleman is after. Good-day."

He was off in an instant, hurrying toward the train entrance.

Will stood looking after him until he had vanished through a door.

Then he turned and made his way toward the ferry-boat.

Reaching New York he found that a Havana steamer had come in that morning. But there was no such name as Pearson Fletcher on her list of passengers.

We will not follow the shrewd detective in his errand. It will suffice to say that it was a long one. It was noon of the next day when he made his reappearance at his office. But there was a new expression on his face. The uncertainty of the day before had vanished. He was his own keen self again.

Among the letters awaiting him was one from Will Emory, stating the result of his investigation of the Havana passenger list.

"Not there. I know that. How do, Jenkins! Anything for me?"

"Here is a note that was left by a boy. Marked, in haste," said the man who had just entered.

Logan took it and tore it open. He ran his eyes over it quickly, while a smile curled his lips.

"They have not forgotten," he remarked.

"The afternoon of the 20th. And they have laid their plan very neatly. I must read it again, to make no error." He ran his eyes once more over the letter. "I am to row out alone, on the East river, bringing the ransom. I must row up-stream, just before sunset, and land where I see the signal of three handkerchiefs hung in a row. If I fail to come alone there will be no signal. Very well managed. They are bound not to be caught napping. But they don't happen to know the man they are dealing with."

He took from a drawer the revolver he had captured, and proceeded carefully to load it.

"I have somehow taken a fancy to this bit of steel and wood," he smilingly remarked. "It carries good luck with it in this business. If they force me to use it, somebody will be hurt."

Hastening through his office business, and holding short consultations with several persons in the building, he stepped into the street and made his way to Mr. Middleton's office. Here a somewhat lengthy consultation took place. When the detective left he was the richer by the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars, in good legal tenders, the amount of the ransom.

His next movement was toward a restaurant, where he sat down to a very deliberate meal.

An hour afterward found him on the wharves, making negotiations for the hire of an easy-rowing boat.

The approach of the sunset hours found the detective on the river, rowing leisurely along between the two cities.

As he rowed along his eyes were fixed on the shore, in readiness for the promised signal. But sunset was at hand, and he had passed the spot of his imprisonment, without a trace of the signal.

A boat that lay some distance in front of him wheeled round toward the Brooklyn shore. As it did so three handkerchiefs were displayed for a moment in a line over the stern.

They were immediately withdrawn, and the boat continued its inward course. Logan turned and followed.

There were two men in the boat. They landed, fastened it, and stepped ashore. Logan had recognized them at sight. They were the pair of kidnappers, Jake Clark and Toby Myers.

Fifteen minutes afterward found them at the door of the solitary house. Not a soul was visible. They opened the door and entered, followed by the fearless detective.

Entering the room in which he had had former conferences with his captors he found it occupied by five persons. Three of those were men he well knew, comprising his two captors and the fellow who had acted as jailer.

The other two were dressed in rough clothing, so large as to mask their forms. Their faces were likewise masked, their eyes alone being visible. On the table before them lay a small arsenal of pistols.

"This job must be done on the square," spoke one of them, in a disguised voice. "If there is any treachery tried, Jack Logan, you will not live to boast of it."

"I have the ransom money here," answered Logan briefly. "I am in as much danger from treachery as you. But to prove that I do not fear it here is the money. Count it, and pass me over your prisoner."

He threw a bundle of notes on the table with a careless gesture. With some show of surprise at this movement the two men proceeded to count the money.

"All right. It foots up, correctly," said the spokesman. "You have kept your bargain. We will keep ours. Bring out the prisoner," he signed to the jailer.

"I will go with you," remarked Logan quietly. "I want to see in what sort of den you have kept him."

No objection was made to this, and the detective followed his conductor from the room.

Several minutes passed. Then the door reopened, and the surly-faced jailer re-entered.

Count Ormond followed him. It was the count in every trait and feature, in dress, hair and whiskers, and courtly ease of manner. But there was no one else; the detective failed to put in an appearance.

"How is this?" cried the masked spokesman, sharply. "Where is Logan?"

"Stayed back. Wanted to 'vestigate," declared the surly jailer.

"You confounded fool! Go for him, instantly!"

"He may save himself that trouble," replied the count, in his most polite tone.

"How? What do you mean?"

"That he needn't go far in search of John Logan. Your man is here."

In an instant the count's wig and whiskers were off, and the detective stood revealed before the astounded villains.

They sprang to their feet with cries of rage and alarm, seizing each a brace of pistols as he did so.

"Treachery!" they cried. "By the Lord! you shall not live to boast of it!"

"Keep cool; and don't pull trigger, as you value your lives!" answered the calm detective, as he quickly drew and cocked his own trusty weapon. "I am a man of my word. But as it is impossible to deliver a man to himself, I calculate you have not earned this ransom."

He laid his hand firmly on the money.

"What does this mean, you treacherous hounds?" cried the masked speaker, turning furiously to his trio of tools.

"It means that you made a slight mistake in

trying a trick of that kind on John Logan, the Ferret!" answered the cool detective. "When you went for Count Ormond you struck a fox in the skin of a sheep. You may as well remove your masks, gentlemen. I know you, George Duncan and Tom Spicer, which, I believe, are your present titles. You are free on this job, according to promise; but I happen to want you for another little job—that of shoving counterfeit stock on Silas Middleton, broker."

At these words, with a violent oath, the masked spokesman leveled his pistol and fired. But it was knocked up by Toby, who stood close by, and the ball passed over the head of the impassive officer.

He made no movement in response, except to put his hand to his lips and give vent to a shrill whistle.

The sound had hardly died away before the door of the house was thrown open, and two men rushed into the room.

"Don't try that on again," remarked the detective, quietly. "You may as well give up, Duncan. Your rope is at an end. I arrest you, not for kidnapping, but for forgery."

His hand fell heavily on the shoulder of the discovered criminal.

CHAPTER XIII.

COUNT ORMOND'S SECOND ADVENT.

WE need scarcely say that the events recorded in the last chapter made a decided stir in society. The reappearance of Count Ormond in the saloons of the fashionable circles, was hailed by a regular ovation. The good ladies, who so dearly loved a titled foreigner, would have swallowed him alive had it been possible. As it was, they were wild with joy at his release.

"Is it really true what everybody is saying," asked one of the circle, after the delighted excitement had subsided, "that George Duncan has been arrested for forgery?"

"And that he is a notorious villain, who has been palming himself off on society as the son of a noted Western millionaire?"

"And that this is but one of a dozen names under which he is known?"

"It is all true," answered the count. "I have made inquiries, and I am so positively told. George Duncan is one bold forger."

"The impertinence of the wretch! And to think of his courtly and high-toned manner! Could it be possible for a low-born rascal to assume such a manner?"

"No doubt of it," answered the count.

"It may be possible in our mixed American circles," answered a lady, thoughtfully. "It could not be possible in society abroad. For instance, Count Ormond, it would be utterly ridiculous for one not born to the title to assume the role of a nobleman with us. We would see through the counterfeit at a glance."

"I am not so sure of that," said the count, with a smile. "I fancy a good actor could deceive even you."

"Never—never! There is a tone, a manner, an aroma, if I may say so, that clings to the born nobility, and the lack of which at once reveals the impostor."

The count showed his white teeth in a laugh, and changed the conversation.

Shortly afterward he left the circle and made his way to the street. There was a look of deep amusement on his aristocratic face.

"If these good ladies should ever know how they have been humbugged, I would never be forgiven," he said to himself. "I fancy they would a thousand times prefer that I should keep the ransom money rather than be exposed to public ridicule for being taken in by a detective in the disguise of a nobleman. Yet I am about to shed my borrowed skin as a count. I must let those charming creatures down easily. They have been too kind to me to be made a laughing-stock."

The next morning there appeared in the newspaper columns an item to the effect that the noble Count Ormond, whose strange adventure had created such a sensation in New York, had been suddenly called to New Orleans on important business. He had been obliged to set off at a moment's notice, and was forced to take this way to bid adieu to his many friends, whom he hoped to see again very soon.

"So exits the count," laughed the detective. "I fancy he will not get back from New Orleans at an early date."

He was on his way, as he spoke, to the Jersey City ferry. Crossing the Hudson, he took his seat in an out-going train, and in a few minutes more he was gliding over the New Jersey flats at locomotive speed.

He left the train at Elizabeth, and proceeded on foot toward the older portion of that town.

He paused at length in front of a large but sober mansion in a retired street.

"Is Mr. Fletcher in?" he asked of the servant, who answered his pull at the bell.

"No, sir. He will not be in till 6:30."

"You are certainly mistaken. He made an appointment to meet me at six."

"He told me himself the hour he would return. He has just come back from Havana, sir, and has much business."

"Just so. But here is his own signature, with house address." He handed the servant a slip of paper. "He must have forgotten. Very well. I will wait. Fortunately I am in no great hurry back."

The servant recognized the handwriting as that of his master, and ushered the visitor in with profuse apologies.

"He must have changed his mind since morning. No doubt he will be home in a few minutes. Step in here, sir. Let me have your hat."

"It is of no importance," said Logan, throwing his hat on the table, and picking up a newspaper, as he fell back into a cushioned chair. "I can manage to amuse myself till he comes."

The servant withdrew, leaving the visitor alone in the waiting-room.

"I have ways of my own of amusing myself, my good fellow," said the detective to himself.

He threw down the newspaper, rose from his chair, and advanced with a noiseless step to the door of the room. Here he stood for a minute or two, intently listening.

Hearing no disturbing sound, he slipped out into the hall, and made his way to the stairs. Up these he vanished, and all sunk again into silence.

At seven o'clock the house door again opened, and the tall, dark-faced personage of the ferry entered.

"There is a gentleman waiting for you in the parlor, sir," said the servant. "He has been here since six o'clock."

"Six? I told him seven. I'll see him at once."

He opened the parlor door, and entered. The next moment he emerged again, and called James in a sharp tone:

"There is no one here," he declared.

"I left him there. I told him you would be home at 6:30. He offered to wait."

"Hang his forgetfulness! Seven was the hour. So he has got tired and walked out? Not a very polite way of leaving a man's house. I fancy he don't very badly want the lots he offered to buy. Well, let him go. I don't care to sell. Is supper ready, James?"

"Yes, sir."

An hour afterward he had finished his supper, put on his slippers and dressing-gown, and ascended to his room on the second floor.

This was a large apartment, handsomely furnished, with velvet carpet and richly curtained windows. Opposite the door by which he entered was another, opening into a deep closet. On the side of the room opposite the windows was another doorway, but a pair of rich, drooping curtains here supplied the place of a door.

The master of the house took a turn or two up and down the room, with folded arms, as if deeply cogitating.

"But two days more," he muttered to himself. "Two short days, and my long delayed revenge will be consummated. Ruin him? Ruin is nothing. Disgrace is what he fears, and deeply disgraced he shall be. The money king, proud of his honor and his record, shall bow his head in shame before the people of New York. I have sworn it, and by my father's soul I will accomplish it!"

These last words were hissed out with the vigor of concentrated hatred.

After a few turns more he seated himself at the desk, which he threw open. He continued to talk, in an audible tone, as he drew some papers from their pigeon-holes and opened them.

"He fondly dreams that I have been in Havana. He little knows that I have been on hand at his elbow, preparing for his dishonor. Wouldn't he writhe if he knew the neat plan by which my letters and telegrams have been re-forwarded from Havana?"

He laughed, a laugh of devilish malignity, as he examined the papers he had opened.

"Little he dreamed that I kept a duplicate key to the safe," he continued, speaking clearly in his confidence that he was alone. He seemed to gloat over the mischief he had prepared.

"His detectives may hunt the lost diamonds. I fancy they will hardly find them. In this paper lies the secret of their hiding-place. No man—not even myself, can recover them without this document."

He laughed in triumph, as he struck the palm of his hand on the important paper.

Almost as if that blow had set off a secret train, there was at that instant a sharp explosion in the room shaded by the drooping curtains. It sounded like a fulminating cracker.

In utter amazement, Fletcher sprang up with a loud cry of surprise, and rushed to the room from which this strange sound had proceeded. He thrust the curtains apart and hurried into the shadowy room.

As he did so a lithe figure glided out from behind the curtain, and slipped noiselessly across the floor.

Two minutes passed. Then Fletcher returned more amazed than before.

"What could it have been? I see nothing but a scrap of scorched paper. Has somebody prepared a trick to astonish me? Ha!"

He paused suddenly, his face pale as death, his frame shaking as in a palsy, his starting eyes fixed in horror and dismay on the open desk.

The valuable paper in which lay the secret of the diamond robbery, had disappeared!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DEED OF A DESPERATE MAN.

IT was the day fixed for the return of the loaned diamonds. And yet they had not been found. The efforts of the detectives, so far as known to the broker, had been futile. George Duncan, the forger, lay in prison, but the broker would have willingly ten times lost the fifty thousand if he had but been able to keep his word of honor with the diamonds.

He sat at home with a face of deep and brooding gloom. He had just opened a letter brought him by the last mail, and his eyes were fixed with despair on its contents.

"He returned five days ago. He has been too busy since his return to call on me. But he will call at three o'clock to-day for the diamonds, as per his letter from Havana. It is absolutely necessary he should have them to-day, for important family reasons. He trusts with implicit confidence to the unblemished honor of a Middleton that they shall be returned as per agreement."

"The unblemished honor of a Middleton," repeated the broker in his gloomiest accents, dropping his head despairingly upon his hand. "Shall it be said that that honor is tarnished? Shall the finger of scorn be pointed at me, as the man who boasted of his unsullied reputation, yet failed to keep his plighted word? Nor is that all. It will be said that I myself made way with the loaned diamonds. But it shall not be said of me alive! I will not live to survive my honor." This was said in a tone of deep and fervent resolution.

The dark reflections of the despairing man were interrupted by the sound of a step in the hall below.

It was Will Emory. There was a sorrowful look on the young man's face as he ascended the stairs. He paused for a moment to speak to a man whom he met on the landing.

"You are John Logan's agent?"

"Yes, sir."

"Watch closely, for it is important now. Have you removed all weapons?"

"All that I can discover."

"He may have concealed some. Be on the alert. It don't take long for a man to kill himself, in these days of science."

He kept on, and entered the room where sat his uncle. The good broker was crouched in his chair until he seemed shrunken to half his size. He looked twenty years older in the face.

"What news, Will?" he asked in a listless tone.

"I have the best hopes," answered Will, with an effort at cheerfulness. "Logan is working—working hard. He is sure he is on the right track, and that before dark to-day he will lay the lost diamonds in your hands."

"It will be too late," he said. "I have here a letter from Pearson Fletcher. He will call at three to-day for the diamonds. What answer shall I give him?"

"Put him off on any plea. Tell him that they are in bank, or in a Safe Deposit vault. Promise them as soon as you can withdraw them from deposit."

"That answer will not do," said the broker, fixing his eyes on the enthusiastic youth. "I have had full notice. That is not the way of a Middleton. The diamonds must be in my hands by three to-day, or the worst will come to pass."

Will listened, and heard in his voice the tone of an implacable resolution. He saw that his uncle's mind was weakened by the impending trouble, and that he might as well reason with a lunatic as with him in his present humor.

The young man sprang up and paced the floor impatiently for several minutes.

"You have not still that mad scheme in mind?" he cried sharply. "That wild idea of killing yourself?"

"Would you have me live disgraced?" asked his uncle, with unyielding resolution.

Will's face burned with vexation. He clinched his fists in helpless spite.

"If I dared tell you all!" he cried. "But the detective has pledged me to silence, and honor forbids me speaking. I have my sense of honor too. Wait, uncle," he exclaimed with a sudden thought. "We may be in time yet. I will go to the detective and urge him to carry out his scheme at once. If we are not here at three detain your visitor. We will not be long after."

Without waiting for an answer, Will hastened away.

Mr. Middleton looked after him, roused for the moment to hope and animation. But the old despair quickly settled again upon his face.

"It is only a boy's wild notion," he said, gloomily. "Or he is seeking to deceive me. Yes, that is it. If there was any hope they would not conceal their plans."

He turned and roamed irresolutely through the rooms of his splendidly-furnished mansion.

The hours passed by. Dinner was announced, but he had no heart to eat.

As he thus irresolutely wandered the police spy covertly followed. Every movement was watched by this man's keen eyes. He was seeking to discover if the desperate man had yet some weapon concealed.

It was on the point of the hour of three when the despairing man ascended to his office, yet occupied by the empty safe.

He made a quick investigation of this and the adjoining room, while a look of anger marked his face.

"So they have been at work," he exclaimed. "They have dared to remove my weapons! Fools! Did they think to get the better of me by such a shallow artifice? I have here that which could kill six men, in my own possession!"

He tapped his finger meaningly on his vest. The police spy, who had listened to these words, drew back from the door irresolutely.

"So! He has poison about him," he cried. "What is to be done? He may be too quick for me. I must be keenly on the alert. If I could but manage to be in the room. I must contrive some plan. It is a desperate case."

Fifteen minutes afterward the door-bell rung. Its clang went like a pistol-shot through the heart of the waiting debtor.

Yet Silas Middleton was no weakling. With the strength of a mental giant he forced the expression of despair from his face, drew himself up into his ordinary, dignified attitude, and sat awaiting his visitor with a face as calm and composed as if it was some ordinary business operation which he had to perform.

"Mr. Pearson Fletcher," announced the servant at the door.

The tall, dark-faced man entered, with a stiff bow and a forced smile.

"I am very happy to see you, Mr. Middleton," he said. "I should have called sooner, but have been unable. Time is precious with me to-day, but I have nothing more important than my errand here."

He held out his hand. The broker sat unmoving, and made no effort to take it. An expression of surprise and displeasure marked the visitor's face.

"I cannot take your hand, Pearson Fletcher," spoke the host, slowly and deliberately. "I can take the hand of no honest man; for I have ceased to be a man of honor myself."

"What do you mean, sir? I do not not understand you. The diamonds—"

"Are gone. I have proved a faithless custodian. I have suffered them to be stolen. I am unable to keep my solemn pledge!"

These words seemed drawn from the very depths of the soul of the despairing man.

The visitor sprung to his feet, with a look of anger and disbelief.

"Lost! Stolen! It is false! You have made away with them! You have used them for purposes of your own! This is the father again in the son! And I, like my father, have suffered myself to be deceived a second time by a Middleton!"

"I expected this," answered the broker, quietly. "That I have not done as you say I will prove, by offering you twice their value."

"Their value? It is nothing to me! It is the diamonds I want. The diamonds I will have, or I will proclaim your dishonorable conduct in the streets of New York, and brand you everywhere as a liar, a villain, and a thief!"

"You may. You have the right to do so. But you cannot hurt me. You cannot dishonor me, because I will not live to bear dishonor," answered the broker, rising in dignity to his full height. "The man who is ready to die for his honor cannot be disgraced. I offer my self here as a victim upon the altar of honor and probity."

His hand, which had rested upon his breast, was suddenly withdrawn and carried to his lips.

At the same moment a loud cry came from without, and the police spy rushed into the room. He caught the hand of the suicide, and jerked it forcibly down from his mouth.

Yet there was a smile of triumph on Mr. Middleton's face, as he turned it upon his assailant.

"You are too late," he calmly said. "See! The bottle is empty. In ten minutes I will be a dead man. I have lost my life, but saved my honor."

The spy looked at him with glaring eyes, and then turned and ran hastily away.

"A doctor! A stomach pump!" he muttered. "I must bring help at once!"

The two men were left alone. There was a covert smile of triumph on Fletcher's dark face. Middleton was as calm and unmoved as an ancient martyr.

"I have paid my debt with my life," he quietly said. "Do you ask more?"

"No," answered the creditor, with a look of ferocious joy. "Fool! you do not know what you have done, or for whom! I do not know a Middleton, you say. You do not know a Fletcher! Did you imagine that the injury done by your father to mine was forgotten? Did you fancy that your weak payment of the debt would end the demands of vengeance? He made me swear on his death-bed to be revenged on the house of his foe. I have devoted my life to the purpose, and have succeeded in revenging my father on the accursed race of the Middletons. Blind fool! The diamonds loaned you were but a lure! It was I—I—that stole them from you. I have hunted you to death—death or dishonor! I had sworn it. It is accomplished!"

He had picked up the fallen vial as he spoke and read its label—*strychnia*. He turned with an intention to lock the door of the room; but ere he could do so it was thrust open and a man appeared, at sight of whom the villain recoiled.

"Josephs!" he exclaimed. "The man who called on me to buy those lots! What brings you here? Ha! Is it as I feared? Did you conceal yourself in my house, and steal that paper?"

He stood crouching like a cat, as if about to spring in fury on this intruder.

"Keep your distance, Fletcher," said the Pinkerton detective quietly. "Don't try that on. It might not work. I have another name besides Harry Josephs, and that name is John Logan! You need not tell this gentleman that you stole his diamonds. I know it. The paper you lost two days ago has guided me to where you had concealed them. I have them here.—Keep off!" repeated Logan, sternly, as he drew a pistol. "You will find me a bad man to attack, just now, you doubly dyed villain."

Fletcher stood like a wolf at bay, his teeth glistening in his fury.

"So, you have hunted me down!" he sneered. "It is too late. I have won my revenge. I care not what becomes of me now. My foe is dead—slain by his own desperate hands."

Logan turned quickly toward the despairing broker, who sat crouched in a chair, his face full of agony. But, it was mental agony rather than physical. His wild haste had driven him to a terrible deed from whose consequences he saw no escape.

Logan picked up the bottle and glanced at the label.

"Good heaven!" he cried. "This is terrible! Where was your nephew? Where was my man? After all my precautions they have let you do this!"

As he spoke steps were heard on the stairs, and the spy hastily entered, followed by a dignified personage.

"He is here, doctor," cried the spy. "You must go to work at once. He is dying now. Here is the bottle."

The doctor took the vial and looked at its label, while his face fell.

"Did he drink the contents of this?" he asked. "Yes, I saw him do it. Can you do nothing to save him?"

"No. He is past hope. There is no remedy or antidote to that virulent poison, after a half hour in the stomach."

"I am not so sure of that," came a voice from the door.

All turned to see who spoke. It was Will Emory who entered.

"I have been seeking you in vain," he said to Logan. "I have overheard your words. My uncle has killed himself by poison you say. Is this the bottle that held it?"

"Yes."

"Smell that," he said, handing it to the doctor. "Has it the odor of the poison?"

"No," answered the doctor in surprise. "That vial is wrongly labeled. It did not contain strychnine."

"I judge not," answered Will, "for I washed it out, filled it with a solution of quinia and returned it to Mr. Middleton's pocket. I have not been asleep. He is in no more danger than any of us present."

At these words the seemingly dying man sprung hastily up, the despair on his face giving way to an expression of hope and gratitude.

"Will! Will! Is that the truth?" he cried.

"As I am a living man!"

"Thank God for that! I have played the fool. I owe you eternal gratitude for saving me from the consequences of my folly!"

A fearful oath broke from the lips of the villain at this utter destruction of his hopes.

"By all that's evil!" he yelled, "you shall escape me by no such trick. Die, ingrate! And take with you the curses of your deadly foe, Pearson Fletcher!"

He had drawn a pistol as he spoke and leveled it with sure aim. Only for the hand of the detective, who stood near, Silas Middleton would have been a dead man. But the pistol hand was knocked up and the ball went through the ceiling of the room.

"You had better come with me," said the detective, dryly. "You are not safe here. I can find you better quarters."

Without a word the baffled scoundrel obeyed, hanging his head in an aspect of utter despair. He had played his last card and lost, and all the life seemed to go out of him as he meekly followed the invincible officer away.

What followed it is not necessary to relate in full. Suffice to say, the joy that reigned in that mansion was fully equal to the gloom which had so lately enveloped it.

In fact, our story is done, and only the necessary last words are called for. The mystery of the diamond robbery had been fully revealed, the deadly malice of the long-brooding villain thwarted, and the law had laid its heavy hand on him, to bring the retribution which he so richly deserved.

Three villains had been detected by the Invincible Ferret in the course of his investigation. The law dealt with all three for their separate crimes, and the prison doors opened to receive them for long terms of felon service.

As for Silas Middleton, he had been taught a lesson which he never forgot for the rest of his life. He returned the diamonds that same day to the hands of their owner, by the aid of the detective. His honor was saved, and he took good care never again to get himself in a position in which he would need such a perilous loan.

His gratitude to his nephew was deep and abiding, though it vexed him a little at times to think how completely he had been cheated. Yet Will is now a full partner in his uncle's business, the name of the firm being Middleton and Emory, Brokers.

The Pinkerton detective, Invincible John Logan, was in something of a quandary. He felt that he had no right to the ransom money. Yet he could not reveal his masquerade as Count Ormond without shaming his fair friends. A portion of the money had gone to the lesser villains, according to his promise, but the remainder lay like a white elephant on his hands.

Mr. Middleton finally relieved him of the difficulty, by receiving the money and sending it as a secret donation to a well-known charitable institution.

Yet the detective was not permitted to suffer for his honesty. An equal sum was forced upon him by the generous and grateful broker, as payment for the valuable service he had received. He would gladly have given the detective twice the sum had he demanded it.

One mystery remained for the fashionable people of society. What had become of Count Ormond? He failed to return from New Orleans, according to promise, and many a wonder was wasted on the missing nobleman.

What had become of him is a mystery which has not yet ceased to trouble the leaders of New York society.

THE END.

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